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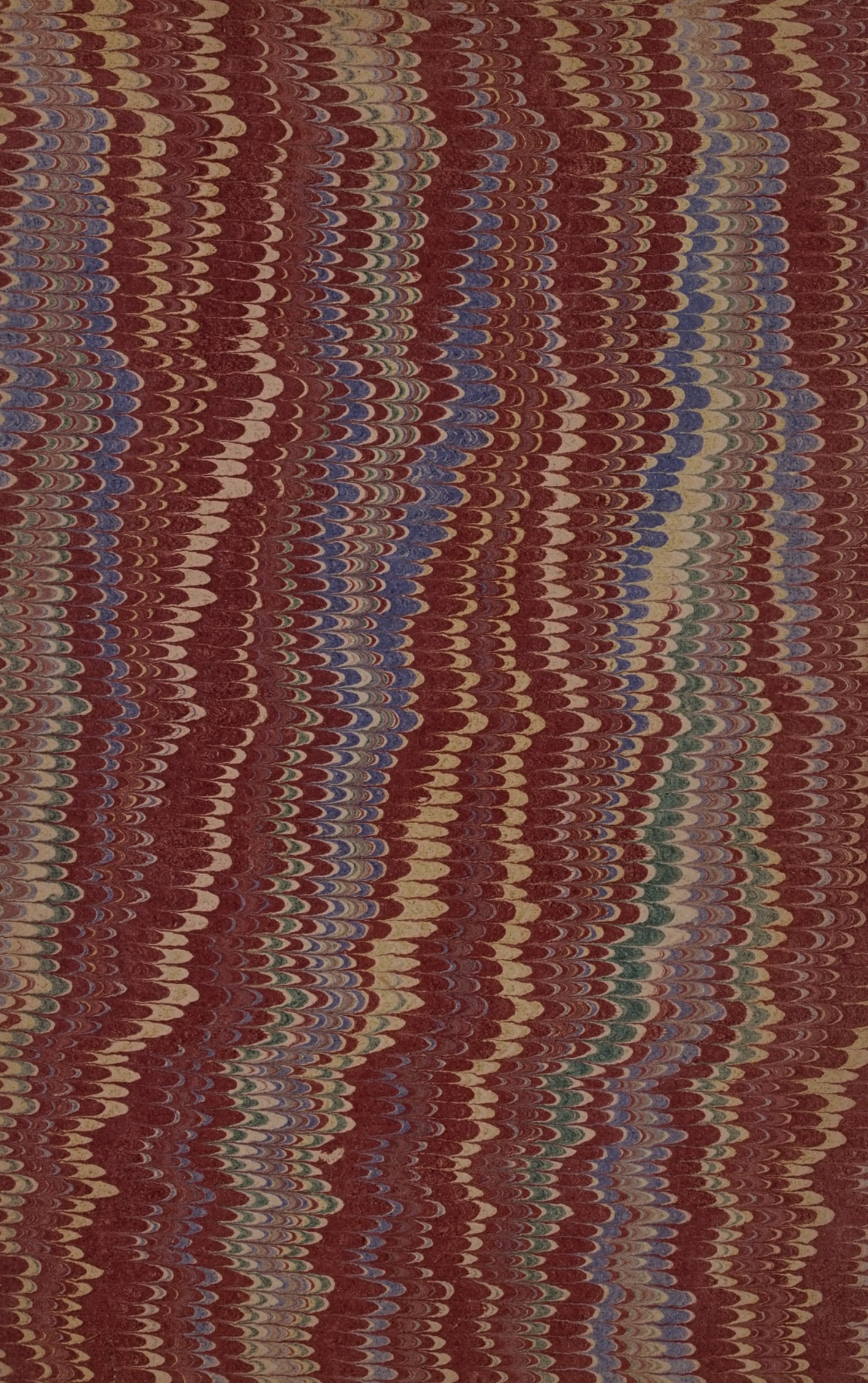
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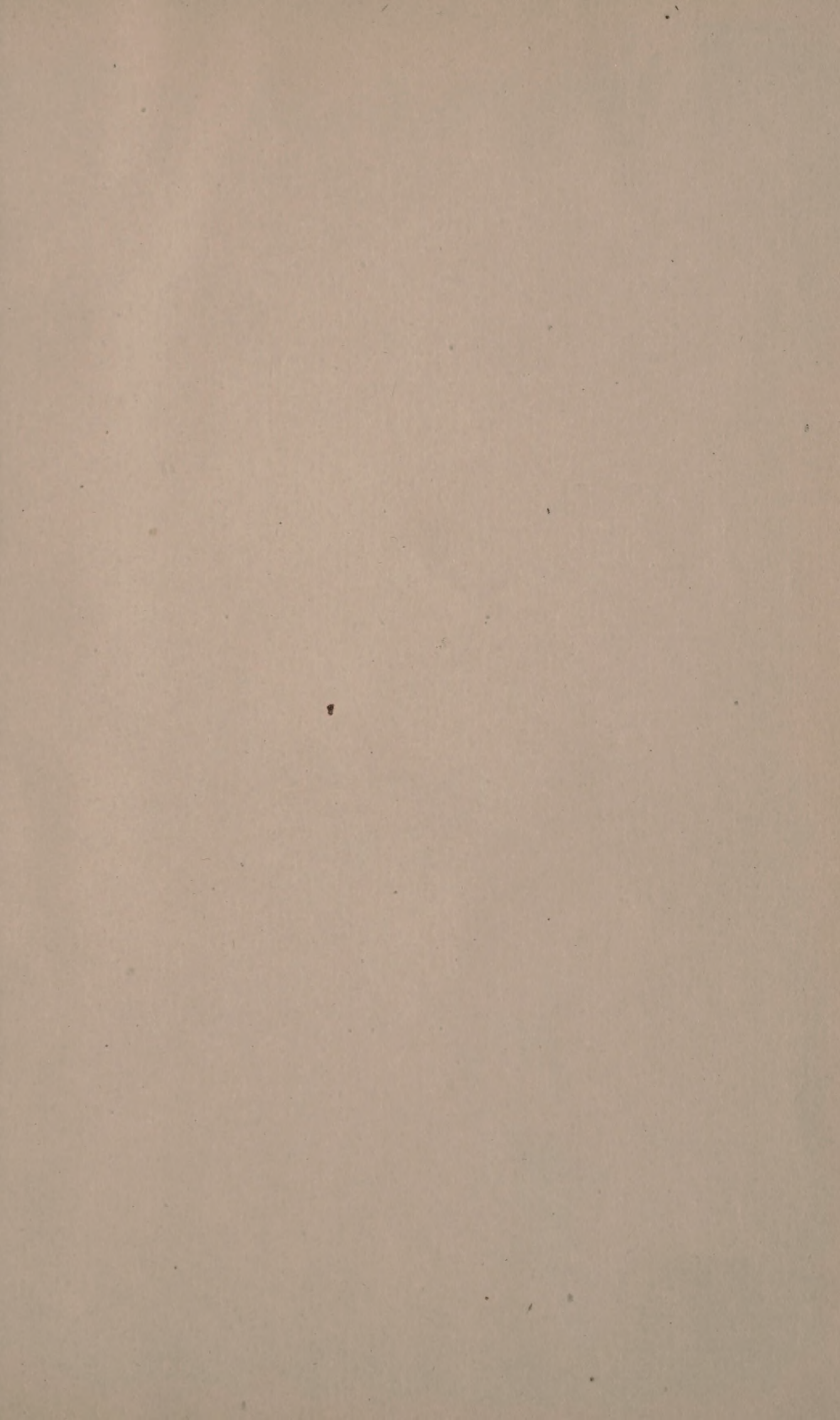
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Guy Tresillian's Fate

A Sequel to "Tresillian Court."

By Mrs. Harriet Lewis.

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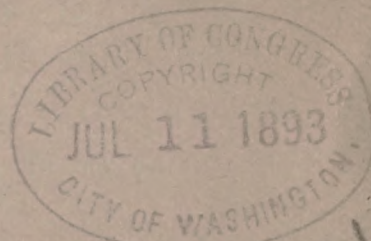
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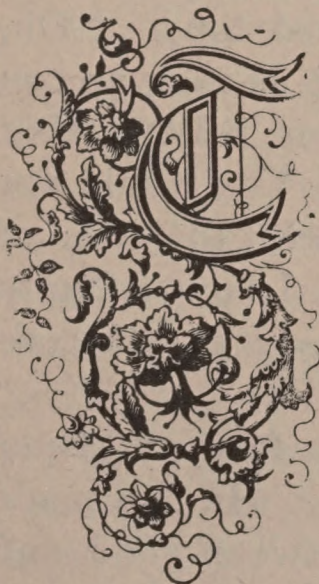
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GUY TRESSILIAN'S FATE.

CHAPTER I.

PUT AWAY.



HE short December day was drawing near its close when Jasper Lowder, his wife and child steamed out of the old cathedral town of Gloucester, on their way to the bleak northern county, where Lowder intended that Hester and her boy should live and die in the dim seclusion he deemed necessary to his safety.

There was snow in the air. The car windows were dripping with the moisture condensed from the atmosphere. The car lamp was lit in the centre of the compartment ceiling, but its dim rays did not avail to make the place cheerful. The city lamps were already lighted, but their

gleam was faint and watery, reminding one of bleared and rheumy eyes peering through the darkness.

The three, husband, wife and child, had their compartment entirely to themselves, Lowder having bestowed a liberal gratuity upon the guard.

Hester laid her boy upon one of the cushioned seats, pillowing his little head upon her travelling rug, and tucking him up warmly with her Scotch tartan shawl. Then seating herself opposite her sleeping child, she drooped her own tired head to Lowder's shoulder with a tender confidingness that should have smitten him to the heart.

"It is so good to have a husband once more to lean upon and look up to," said the wife, smiling and sighing.

Lowder stole his arm around her.

"You cannot 'look up to me' very well," he said, with seeming bitterness. "How I must have fallen in your estimation, Hester! How you must despise me!"

"Oh, no, no!" cried Hester, in a pained tone. "Oh, no, indeed, dear Jasper! You repented as soon as you realized what you had done. I will not believe that you were yourself that terrible night. You would not have taken a pin belonging to another with the idea of stealing it, if you were really yourself. I do look up to you, Jasper, and day and night my prayer is that our boy may grow up to be like his father."

In the dim light of the car lamp the face of Jasper Lowder looked ghastly at that moment. He had made his choice between right and wrong, between good and evil, and though now his stifled, outraged conscience had ceased to upbraid him and bid him repent his choice, yet he was not yet utterly hardened. His soul had awakened to the music of his child's voice. He was sorry for poor, gentle, timid Hester, whose only

fault was in loving him too well, and trusting him too implicitly.

"Heaven grant he may be a better man than I have been!" he said involuntary, in a hoarse and broken voice.

The young wife nestled closer to him. She fancied that he was brooding over the sin he professed to have committed—the sin of robbing his benefactor.

It must not be supposed that Hester's ideas of right and wrong were at all vague and undefined. Had another told her the story that Lowder had rehearsed, she would have been shocked beyond measure at the guilt and treachery of the wretched criminal. As it was, the pretended revelation had been a shock to her, in her love and pride for her husband, but she had invented a thousand excuses for him, had pitied him for the supposed momentary yielding, now so bitterly repented, and resolved that no word or look of her's should ever remind him how deeply he had erred.

There was a little silence between the pair. Hester was quiet from very excess of happiness, in feeling around her the sheltering arm of the husband she had mourned as dead. And he was busy, with his wife's head on his breast, with his dreams of the hour when the little golden head of Blanche Irby should nestle there, in just such tender confidingness, in just such loving abandonment.

"Do you know where we are going, dear?" asked Hester at last rousing her husband from his unhallowed fancies.

Lowder started guiltily.

"I have not quite decided," he said. "I want to find some secluded spot where you and the boy will be safe. If Guy Tressilian refuses to overlook my crime, I will hide myself with you. If he should take me back into

his employ, I will run up to see you now and then, and sometime I will bring you nearer to me, so that we can be more together. You will be lonely often, Hester, but you will find plenty to do in caring for and teaching our boy, and you will bear the loneliness for my sake, I know."

"Gladly, Jasper. To know that I am in the same country with you will be joy enough. To know that you will come to me as often as you can, that I shall see you now and then, will make my lot more than tolerable—even pleasant. You need not worry about me," said the unselfish, true-hearted wife.

The question of where they were going began to occupy Lowder's attention to the exclusion of all others. He pondered it deeply.

He remembered that, a day or two after his arrival at Tressilian Court—the day subsequent to his entering upon the possession of Guy's private estate of Gilde-thorpe, Guy's inheritance from the late Lady Tressilian—Sir Arthur had informed him that he, the pretended son, had another property in the north, the legacy of one of Guy's relatives by his mother's side.

Lowder had made some inquiries at the time concerning this additional estate, and had been informed that it consisted of some twenty acres situated on the declivity of one of the Cheviot hills, and having a small stone cottage. It had been occupied by a north-country man, who had hired a large pasturage in the vicinity for his flocks of sheep, but this man had recently died, and his widow now lived alone.

A brilliant idea struck Lowder. Why not take Hester to Gloam Fell, as the place was called? Why should she not be more securely hidden than elsewhere on this property, of which he now claimed the ownership?

One precaution, however, suggested itself. As Sir

Arthur might, by some chance, be made aware that the place had a new tenant, it would be well for Hester to be known under a name other than that rightfully her own.

He immediately proposed to her to change her name, giving as a reason that otherwise his safety would be endangered.

Hester fell into the trap at once.

"What name shall I take, Jasper?" she asked.

"Your old name. Call yourself Mrs. Hester Blees. I have heard of a cottage known as Gloam Fell, up in Northumberland. In fact, Hester, it belongs to Mr. Guy Tressilian, but none of the Tressilians ever visit it. Sir Arthur said that his son would do well to turn the place into a shooting-box, for grouse is very plentiful in that vicinity. It would be the last place in the world where one would look for you and me. You must be careful never to mention either the name of Tressilian or Lowder—"

"I would rather not go to any place of Mr. Tressilian's, Jasper," murmured the wife.

"Then you don't wish to do as I say? We shall not be indebted to Tressilian, for I have plenty of money to pay my way, independent of that—*that* money. If you refuse to follow my guidance—"

"I don't, Jasper—I don't."

"That is well. There is a woman now in charge of the place, the widow of the late tenant. She cannot afford to retain the place, and has written asking to be relieved of the rental. I will manage the rent, and she will stay with you as housekeeper and companion, no doubt. But you must not let her know that I am your husband. It is better not."

Hester promised compliance with all of these injunctions, many of which she failed to comprehend.

The hours wore on. The little child still slept. Hester, too, fell into fitful and uneasy slumbers ; but Lowder sat upright, his staring eyes looking unblinkingly out into the gloomy night.

On the long, serpent-like train, with its eye of fire, glided—through Birmingham, Sheffield, Leeds, and on up into the bleak northern country. Occasionally, when the train halted in some long and busy station, a guard would open the door and provide the travellers with hot water cans in place of their cold ones, but there were few interruptions other than these.

What were the thoughts of Jasper Lowder during that long and dreary night watch, with his wife on his bosom and his child before his eyes, might be imagined, but not described.

The path of guilt was not so utterly thornless as he had imagined.

Durham and Newcastle were passed, and in the gray of the morning dawn the train glided into the depot at Alnwick. Here the travellers alighted, Lowder carrying his child in his arms, and disguising himself by slouching his hat over his eyes, and drawing up around his face the velvet collar of his greatcoat.

A cab was procured, and Lowder placed in it his wife and boy. He then walked to and fro for a few moments to relax his stiffened limbs, and returning to the cab, gave his order to the driver.

“To the best hotel,” he said.

He entered the vehicle, and the weary travellers were driven to the Northumberland Hotel. Lowder ordered a sitting-room and bedroom, with a fire, and the three were soon installed in comfortable quarters.

When they had refreshed themselves by a partial bath and were warmed and comforted, Lowder rang and ordered a breakfast to be sent up.

In the course of an hour, a tempting repast of thin, crisp bacon, with eggs, broiled game birds, toast, coffee and other edibles was brought up by the attentive waiter, whom Lowder dismissed with a gratuity.

Lowder placed his wife in her chair, put his boy in her arms, and took his own place with quite the air of a family man. The glow came to Hester's pale, thin cheeks as she watched him, and wished that he could be always with her, and just as he was now.

"By the way, Hester," said Lowder, as he carved the delicately browned birds, "you will want to write to me often, of course. It won't be safe for you to address me by my own name, so I must give you an assumed address. You can write to me under cover to John Harroville, at Gloucester. Make a note of the address."

Hester did so, taking out her pocket-book for the purpose.

"Jasper," she said hesitatingly, and with a pleading look, "I should like to return that hundred pounds to Mr. Guy Tressilian. It seems as if I had obtained it under false pretences—"

"Nonsense!" said Lowder harshly, and frowning. "Don't be foolish, Hester. Allow me to manage for you. One would think you had suddenly lost all confidence in my honor and honesty and good sense."

Half frightened, Hester faltered out excuses, and protested that he was quite wrong, and that she would obey him to the letter.

The meal was concluded and Lowder rang for his bill and to order a post-chaise for the remainder of his journey.

An hour thereafter, the little party entered the post-chaise, and Lowder said to the driver, who stood at the door of the vehicle, whip in hand :

"Can you take us to a cottage called Gloam Fell, on

the mountain-side, about twenty miles from Alnwick, and somewhere between Ramshope and Alnham? It is near a tiny hamlet known as Gloamvale, on the mountain north of Carter Fell."

"I know Gloamvale, sir," said the driver. "I can find the cottage you speak of, since it has a name."

He climbed to his box, flourished his whip, and the vehicle went bowling down the pleasant town street.

On leaving Alnwick, the driver struck out for Alnham. Lowder observed in what direction the vehicle was proceeding, and then gave his attention to Hester and his child.

The little fellow was awake, and as bright, merry, and good-natured as on the previous day. He moved restlessly on his mother's knee, studied Lowder's face with baby intentness, and at last, seeming to recognize the tie between this stranger and himself, put up his tiny arms and lisped the name Hester had assiduously taught him :

"Papa !"

The name, uttered by the sweet baby voice, thrilled Lowder's guilty heart with sadness and a vague remorse, but it had no deeper effect. He did not falter in his resolve to abandon his child as his father had abandoned him. But he took the boy in his arms and tossed him up and played with him, and weakly wished in his own heart that he had been rich and had never seen Blanche Irby, in which case he might have been happy with Hester and his child.

The morning was lowering and gloomy, as are nearly all the mornings of December in England. The air had a chill in it, and a wild wind was blowing. The horses made good progress over the rough roads, and by ten o'clock the post-chaise, having left Alnham in the rear,

rattled up the stony single street of the small hamlet known as Gloamvale.

Lowder put his head out of the window and surveyed the scene.

The hamlet was situated at the very foot of the grim old mountain, which sheltered it from the bleak northern winds. It contained but half a dozen stone cottages of meagre pretensions. There was a single shop, the door of which was surmounted by a sign bearing the inscription, "John Noaks, General Dealer," and that John Noaks was a very general dealer was evidenced by the miscellaneous character of his wares. Confectionary, dry goods and vegetables were displayed in the small projecting window; hoop-skirts, mufflers, shawls and boots ornamented his low doorway; and on the sidewalk were pots, pans, poker and other household goods, with bales of sheetings and piles of blankets, baskets of eggs, and strips of cotton lace, bearing the legend, "1*d.* per yard." The letters P. O. in the window signified that the shop was also a post-office.

Beyond the general dealer's was a low stone smithy, the sound of whose hammers beating upon an anvil made music on the gloomy air. The driver of the post-chaise drove up to the door of the smithy, and hailed its proprietor, who came out to the street with his leather apron half enveloping his portly figure, and his hammer in his hand.

"Whereabouts may Gloam Fell be?" asked the driver.

"A mile further up the road, on the mountain-side," was the response, while the smith surveyed the occupants of the chaise curiously,

Lowder tossed the smith a shilling, which was received with a stare of surprise, and the post-chaise resumed its journey.

About a mile from the hamlet, having passed one or two lowly dwellings, the travellers beheld a small stone cottage, of picturesque appearance, set in the midst of a barren garden. A few trees screened the cottage from the road. At one side of the dwelling, divided from the garden by a low stone-wall, was a field of apparently some twenty acres, where sheep of a fine breed were trying to find pasturage. There having been as yet no snows, the sheep had not yet been gathered into their winter fold by their thrifty owner.

"This must be the place," said Lowder, as the chaise drew up before the tall gate in the stone wall shutting off the cottage grounds from the road. "It looks like an ancient hunting-box fallen into decay. Stay here, Hester, while I make inquiries."

He opened the chaise door and leaped out. Bidding the driver remain on his box, he opened the tall gate, which he found unlocked, and hurried up the path to the main entrance of the dwelling. The front part of the house appearing deserted, he did not pause to knock, but followed the path that led around to a rear door.

Here were signs of life and occupancy. The shutters of a rear room were thrown open, and Lowder looked through the unsheltered windows, into a cozy, bright little kitchen. He knocked loudly.

Presently an elderly woman came to the door. She was a tall, gaunt person, with an honest, homely face, and simple, clean attire. She was the widow of the late tenant of Gloam Fell.

"Are you Mrs. Tooker?" inquired Lowder, keeping his face carelessly muffled. "The widow of Jacob Tooker?"

The woman replied in the affirmative.

"I come from Mr. Guy Tressilian, the owner of this place," said Lowder.



LOWDER HELPED HER INTO THE BAROUCHE.—See Chapter V.

The woman put her hand to her ear.

"I am a little hard of hearing," she said. "Won't you come in, sir?"

Lowder followed her into the tidy kitchen, with its bright fire, its rows of gleaming pans, and its cleanly swept hearth.

"I come from Mr. Guy Tressilian, Madam," he said, more loudly, halting near the door, hat in hand. "I bring a letter from Mr. Tressilian."

He produced from his note book a letter he had written that morning at the Northumberland Hotel, and signed with the name of Guy Tressilian. The dame put on her spectacles and slowly perused the letter, which introduced the bearer as Mr. Tressilian's agent, and enjoined upon Mrs. Tooker to treat with him as with the owner.

The effect of the letter upon the simple woman was to cause her to treat the impostor with the most marked respect.

"Mr. Tressilian said that you had written to him that you felt unable to keep the place," said Lowder, in a loud, shrill voice. "And therefore I, as his agent, have let it to a very respectable lady, with her child, who has come with me, and who is now at the gate."

"I am glad that the place is taken off my hands, sir," said Mrs. Tooker. "I was afraid I should be held on the lease, and the rent is too heavy for a lone woman to keep up. I have sold the sheep and stock, and now I will look for a new home. The new tenant has come, you say, sir?"

"Yes, madam; but she desires me to ask you to remain as her housekeeper and companion," said Lowder glibly. "She is a very quiet person, and is too timid to live here alone. She authorizes me to offer you

twenty pounds a year, if you will remain and take charge of the establishment."

The woman looked pleased.

"I should like to stay, sir," she said. "The place is home to me, and it was only the rent that made me think of leaving. Twenty pounds a year! And house room free?"

"And the rent of the field," suggested Lowder.

"The lady is too generous," said Mrs. Tooker, flushing with delight. "But I am afraid she would expect too much. I can cook and mind the house; but as to being 'companion,' I'm afraid I wouldn't suit. I am so deaf, sir, and I've got out of the way of talking much, living so alone and being deaf, that I shouldn't like to be a 'companion' to anybody."

"You would just suit the lady," declared Lowder, well pleased with the woman's description of herself. "You will agree to stay?"

The widow assented.

Lowder counted out ten pounds, her half-yearly salary, and paid it to her.

"The house is furnished throughout, I suppose?" he said.

"Yes, sir. Shall I show it to you?"

"I will bring in the lady, Mrs. Blees, and we will go over the cottage together," replied Lowder. "I wish to see her settled before I leave, as she is a particular friend of Mr. Tressilian!"

He hurried out to the post-chaise and bade Hester alight, himself taking her boy. He then said to the driver:

"There's a sort of inn down at the hamlet. Go there, my good man, and refresh yourself and the beasts. Come for me in an hour."

He tossed him a half-sovereign, at sight of which all

the gloom and discontent left the man's face, and he lifted his hat, saying he would return by the time indicated.

As he drove away, Lowder conducted Hester up the garden walk. Mrs. Tooker opened the front door to admit them, and they entered the narrow, well-lighted hall.

"This is the lady I mentioned—Mrs. Blees, Mrs. Tooker," said Lowder. "Mrs. Blees, I have engaged this good woman to remain with you as housekeeper, and so on, and I have no doubt you will be very comfortable with her."

Mrs. Tooker was charmed with the lady-like and unaffected appearance of the new tenant of Gloam Fell. Her heart warmed to Hester at first sight, and she led the way into the warm kitchen, well pleased with her own prospects as housekeeper to this gentle, sweet-faced, yet sad young creature.

Lowder laid down the now sleeping boy upon a wooden settle, and Mrs. Tooker proposed to show them over the cottage. Accepting her guidance, the wedded pair made an examination of the various rooms.

Up stairs the rooms were but illy furnished, but on the lower floor an appearance of high comfort prevailed. The parlor was a pleasant apartment, with three casement windows, set with tiny diamond panes. It had a worn red carpet, a suit of hair-cloth furniture, a luxurious chintz-covered lounge of simple manufacture, a few silhouettes on the walls, and a great, ample hearth and a yawning chimney, intended for wood-fires.

Adjoining the parlor was a cozy sitting-room, also neatly although cheaply furnished. Hester proposed to make this apartment her bed-room, and use the parlor as her daily sitting-room. She was interested immediately in the arrangement of her new home, where she hoped her husband would often come to visit

her, and engaged in a discussion with Mrs. Tooker as to various improvements she was resolved to make.

While the two woman were thus engaged, Lowder strolled out of doors, visiting the stable, where a stout old horse was kept, and surveying the scenery closely.

It was a lonely, dreary place—Gloam Fell. There were no near neighbors. The hamlet could be seen plainly a mile distant, at the base of the mountain on whose side Gloam Fell was situated. Far and near stretched the mountain fields used for sheep runs.

About a mile further up the mountain, perched upon a solitary elevation, was a mansion of considerable pretensions, in the midst of a small private estate ; it looked like the shooting-box of some wealthy gentleman. And when Lowder returned to the cottage, he inquired of Mrs. Tooker to whom the place belonged.

"That is Bleak Top, sir," said the woman, looking from the window in the direction he indicated. "It is a hunting-box, and belongs to the heiress of an old and wealthy family, the last of her line. Her name is Rymple, sir—Miss Olla Rymple."

"Miss Olla Rymple !" repeated Lowder. "An odd name."

"Yes, sir ; but one of the noblest, sweetest, and most beautiful girls in all England, I hear," remarked Mrs. Tooker. "She has other estates, sir, and none of the Rymples ever staid at Bleak Top, except in the grouse season."

A fire had been made in the parlor, and Hester and her boy had retired to their especial domain. Lowder joined them. He explained how necessary it was that he should return immediately to Tressilian Court, "to make restitution of the stolen money to Guy Tressilian, and to secure his own immunity from punishment." Timid as she was, Hester bravely acquiesced in the

proposed immediate separation. She promised anew to bear in mind and to obey all her husband's injunctions ; to make no friends nor confidants ; to avoid uttering the name of Guy Tressilian or Jasper Lowder, and to be continually on her guard ; and not to leave Gloam Fell until her husband ordered her departure.

The hour was soon passed. The post-chaise arrived at the gate, and Lowder took his leave of wife and child.

"They are disposed of !" he muttered contentedly, as he rode swiftly away on his return to Alnwick. "They are the same as dead and buried here. And now for Tressilian court and pretty, golden-haired Blanche !"



CHAPTER II.

INTERCEPTED.

Olla and her friends were early astir on the morning subsequent to their arrival at the Vesuvius Inn, and were ready for departure by the time the buxom Giuditta made her appearance in Olla's sitting-room with the breakfast things.

"I beg your pardon, Signorina," said the wily Italian, as she deftly spread the table-cloth and proceeded to lay upon it the napkins and dishes, "but is not your name Miladi Reemple ?"

Olla started in swift surprise.

"Why do you ask that ?" she questioned.

"Because—I will be frank, Signorina," responded Giuditta, who had her lesson by heart. "There is a noble Inglese arrived in Naples in search of his runaway

ward—is not that the word? He is a Signor Gower, from Sicily. Ah, you start again and turn pale! Perhaps you know him. He seeks a Miladi Reemple with her servants and an imbecile Inglese named Lowdair,” and she glanced at Guy Tressilian.

Olla turned pale. She did not doubt but that Mr. Gower had pursued her to Naples, instead of going to Marseilles.”

“Is he here?” she cried, springing up into a defiant attitude. “Is he at this inn?”

“No, Miladi,” returned Giuditta, with apparent meekness. “The great Inglese Signore would not visit our poor out-of-town inn. He would not expect to find the runaway Signorina here. But Giacomo, my brother, Miladi, who has just come from his morning’s marketing in Naples, says that the Signore Gower arrived at Naples last night, and that he has visited all the hotels and made inquiries for the runaway Signorina, and he has stationed the police at all the docks and at the railway station to watch and intercept the poor young lady. If she is in Naples she will be found and captured to-day. It was a spy-police who told Giacomo, and asked him if he had seen these runaways.”

Olla’s high courage for a moment faltered. Had she dared and done so much to be captured now? It seemed to her that she was completely hemmed in—that there was no way of escape for her. She resolved to throw herself upon the generosity and compassion of her hostess.

“Signora,” she said tremulously, “I am that runaway Signorina. I am Miss Rymple. I beg you to befriend me. Believe me, I am able to pay for any service you may do me, and you will earn my undying gratitude. This man Gower is my treacherous guardian. He abuses his authority by daring to urge upon me his

love. He has persecuted me until I can bear no more. I would rather die than be recaptured by him !”

“Such spirit !” cried Giuditta, in an apparent rapture of admiration, as she regarded the lovely, glowing face, the great midnight eyes, full of pleading, the small, noble, drooping head. “He shall not recapture you, Miladi. Giuditta will defend you with her life. And yet,” she added, sighing, “what can I do? The police will be here to-day to search my house for you. I shall be arrested, if I am found harboring a runaway ward !”

“And I shall die if Mr. Gower recaptures me,” cried Olla despairingly.

Tressilian, marking her manner, uttered a mournful cry, full of sympathy.

“Are things so bad as that?” inquired Giuditta. “You cannot be seen in Naples. You cannot leave by boat or rail, Signorina for the police will capture you. I cannot keep you here. Capture in that case is equally inevitable. What is to be done? Ah, I have it! You can cross the country, Signorina, in a carriage. You can go to Termoli, and take the train from there to Ancona, Bologna, Turin, and so on to France. It is an admirable plan—”

“Admirable !” echoed Olla, her face brightening. “As Mr. Gower has no doubt forestalled me, I cannot go to the British consul at Naples, even if I were sure of gaining his residence unharmed. My only course is flight. I should like to start immediately. Can we procure a conveyance?”

“Oh, yes, miladi. I know a man, one Lipari, as honest as the day. I will send Giacomo for him, and he will convey you in his voiture to Termoli.”

It will be observed that Giuditta had changed the proposed destination of Olla from Chieti, as had been agreed upon between the innkeeper and the Red Car-

velli, but this change was merely to deceive the young fugitive. Chieti was not a railway station, and "Miladi Reemple" might be aware of the fact. If she were not so aware, she might have a Bradshaw to inform her. At any rate, Giuditta considered that it would be well to make her story plausible.

Excusing herself on the ground that she must send Giacomo to the friendly driver to whom she had alluded, Giuditta withdrew, hastening down stairs to inform the worthy Palestro of her success. Giacomo was dispatched in quest of Lipari and his voiture, and the hostess returned to her guests bearing the tray laden with the breakfast.

Olla and Tressilian took their places at the table, and Olla forced herself to eat for Guy's sake. He looked so woful at sight of her troubled face, that the girl affected a gayety she could not feel.

While the pair was thus busy, the Popleys were eating their breakfast in the regular dining-room of the inn. As soon as they had finished, Mrs. Popley returned to her young mistress, who hastened to inform her of the changed state of affairs.

Restraining the lamentations she felt that she could indulge in without effort good Mrs. Popley protested her satisfaction that a way of escape was still open.

By the time the travellers were fully equipped, the voiture arrived. The driver entered the inn, and received his private instructions from Palestro and his wife, moistened his throat with a glass of wine, and returned to his vehicle. Giuditta came up and announced to the fugitives that the voiture waited.

Popley burdened himself with the scanty luggage and led the way out to the carriage. Guy and Olla followed, Mrs. Popley bringing up the rear.

Olla had already settled her bill, and now, in shaking

hands after the English fashion with her treacherous hostess, she left in the palm of the latter a liberal present of money.

"I shall not forget your kindness, Signora," she said, leaning out of the carriage window. "You shall hear from me when I get to England."

The Italian woman expressed her thanks, and Mrs. Popley and Guy entered the carriage. Popley mounted beside the driver, and amid the low salaams of Palestro, Giuditta and Giacomo, the travellers drove away.

Their journey for the next two hours was uneventful. They passed pleasant country villas, thrifty vineyards, lonely and squalid cottages, women with burdens on their heads, half-naked children, and all the features that go to make up Italian scenery. The volcano, the mountains, the valleys—all these would have attracted the earnest attention of Olla at any other time, but now she had no thought save that of gratitude for her escape from the supposed peril that had threatened her.

The progress of the travellers was either not so swift, or the distance was greater than Giuditta had thought. They had left the Vesuvius Inn at eight o'clock, instead of ten, as Olla had designed, and it was noon when they approached the narrow and gloomy gorge where the Red Carvelli lurked with his men, waiting the travellers' coming.

"We must stop at the first hamlet for food," said Olla. "I wonder I did not think to bring a basket of food with us. It is a distance of ninety miles from Naples to Termoli. We shall probably have to change horses."

"We must have come half the distance already, Miss Olla," said Mrs. Popley.

"Not quite. We may have come forty miles, not

more. I begin to feel hungry. I wonder if there is no hamlet near?"

She looked out in quest of some human habitation, but all around her were the wild and desolate features of mountain scenery. The Mont del Matese frowned above them. Their road, rugged and at points dangerous, wound over ravine and fissures, a look into which would have terrified a timid person. It was a strange and romantic spot, a remnant of chaos, a wild and often forbidding scene, and Olla felt her spirits depressed as she gazed upon it.

She was about to request the driver to stop at the first house he encountered, if any house could be found in these wilds, when the voiture rattled swiftly down a steep and gloomy ravine, where dwarfed trees grew, and where great boulders of rock cropped out from the thin layer of soil.

The opposite steep looked formidable. The driver cracked his whip and uttered a shrill cry to his horses, and essayed to climb the hill. The horses had not taken three steps in the ascent, however, when a great shout rang through the ravine, and a half-dozen men sprang out from the shelter of rocks and bushes, and their leader commanded Lipari to halt.

Being one of their confederates, the driver of course halted.

These men were the Red Carvelli and five of his band.

Their garb proclaimed their character. The brigand chief had changed his peasant garments for a jaunty jacket and trowsers of velvet. He wore a tall, sugar-loaf hat, of the style affected by bandits, and in this was stuck a long plume. His men were dressed in similar style, but with humbler materials, and they wore no feathers.

The Red Carvelli doffed his hat and approached the window of the voiture. His terrible visage wore a smile, but the smile was less agreeable than his frown. As his small, keen eyes rested upon Olla's gloriously lovely face, a dull, red gleam appeared in them, and a look of intense admiration took possession of his countenance.

"Pardon, Miladi," he said, with a sudden courtesy for which he was by no means noted. "I am sorry to trouble you—"

Olla comprehended his character at once. She supposed him to be one of the brigands with which poor fallen Italy is infested. She had no money to spare on a "forced loan" like this, and she returned the Red Carvelli's stare with a defiant, undaunted glance. Perhaps she knew that tears and prayers would not avail with this sinister-browed man. At any rate, it was not in her nature to try either.

"You are sorry to trouble me," she said, in better Italian than he employed, as he hesitated, "but you want my money, or my life! Is not that it?"

"No, Signorina, you wrong me!" protested the brigand. "I have no designs against the life of one so young and beautiful. I want your money—"

"You will have to continue to want it," flashed Olla, undauntedly and haughtily. "My money belongs to me, and I intend to keep it. Why should I give up my own money to great lazy, hulking fellows like you? If you want money, earn it. I'd be ashamed even if I were a thief, to rob a girl!"

"I am no thief!" asserted the insulted brigand. "I—"

"If you are not a thief, then move off!" said Olla coolly. "Don't you see you are stopping us?"

"I am not a thief," again declared the Red Carvelli,

"but I am a brigand of terrible repute. I am the Red Carvelli, with whose name all Naples is ringing."

"I never heard it," said Olla, to the brigand's intense mortification. "And it makes no difference who you are. If you are not going to rob us, you had better move on."

"I must have the Signorina's money—"

"Not if I know it!" said Olla, surveying the fellow coolly with her great dusky eyes. "You had better not try it. I have a use for my money myself, and I don't propose to part with it at present. I shall fight in defence of my property with such tools as nature has supplied, hands and feet and teeth, if necessary. Take my advice, my thieving friend, and go on."

The girl's bright audacity charmed the brigand chief. To conceal his weakness from the eyes of his men, who were equally astonished at Olla's cool defiance, he ordered Guy to give him his purse.

Poor Guy only replied by a melancholy, half-frightened look, that sufficiently declared his state of mind.

"He has no money," said Olla. "He is unfortunate, as you see. The two others are my servants. I carry the money for all. Take it if you can!"

She folded her arms across the front of her little seal-skin jacket, and looked defiance at the Red Carvelli.

He replied by a long admiring stare.

"You are a trump, Signorina!" he ejaculated. "Nature meant you to be in our line—a Bandit Queen, or something of that sort. Per Bacco! You have the spirit of a man—"

"Humph! That's a doubtful compliment, seeing that you are a man!" said the audacious little Olla.

"She dares to beard the Red Carvelli!" cried the brigand, more and more enamored of the bright, bold young girl. "She is a prize. You may keep your

money, Signorina, and I will take *you* ! Be pleased to alight."

But Olla refused. It was not until Popley had been dragged down from the box and bound ; not till Mrs. Popley had been forced to descend from the vehicle, and was also bound, and they were dragging out poor Guy, that she showed signs of yielding.

"Do not lay a finger on him !" she commanded, with a haughty gesture. "Do not touch him. Since my servants are captive, I will follow them. But do not lay a hand upon this poor young man, I command you !"

"Do not touch him, comrades !" ordered the Red Carvelli. "Let the little lady have her way."

Olla quietly descended alone. Guy followed her. The brigand chief then addressed the driver of the voiture.

"Be off !" he cried. "And be thankful you escape with your life. Off with you !"

Lipari winked knowingly at the chief, turned his equipage, and set off smartly on a return to Naples.

Olla and her party looked after him in dismay.

"The horses !" said the Red Carvelli, in an authoritative voice.

The men plunged into the thicket, presently returning mounted, each man leading an extra horse.

Two of these animals were equipped with lady's saddles. The brigand chief with eager politeness assisted Olla to mount one of these. Mrs. Popley was helped into another. Popley was mounted, as was Guy. The Red Carvelli mounted last of all.

"Humph !" said Olla, with a gleam of suspicion. "Four horses ! And there are four of us prisoners. Two lady's saddles ! And two women to occupy them ! A very singular coincidence, if it is a coincidence !"

She looked sharply at the brigand chief. He avoided

her glance, and occupied himself in taking possession of a strap by which to lead her horse.

One of the brigands led Guy's horse similarly. The Popleys were secured from all possibility of flight by the same precaution.

"No doubt, Miladi," said the Red Carvelli, "you have heard a great deal about Italian brigands. You are now about to become acquainted with them personally. I am going to take you to our haunts, and you can study at your leisure the merry monarchs of the road."

"One moment," said Olla. "Suppose I were to give you my money?"

"Too late. I want *you* now," and the Red Carvelli smiled with a terrible significance. "Too late, Signorina. Your fate is sealed. Forward, men!"

The party of bandits, leading their prisoners, plunged into the ravine, riding in nearly single file along an almost imperceptible path toward the mountain fastness of the Red Carvelli and his terrible band.

CHAPTER III.

A MOUNTAIN FASTNESS.

The brigands, following their chief, the Red Carvelli, and keeping a tight hold upon the horses of their prisoners, continued to ride along the narrow path at right angles with the road on which Olla and her friends had been travelling, and following the course of the rugged and tortuous ravine. They thus traversed several miles, winding about the mountain side as it seemed, and gradually ascending the acclivity.

At length, as by a common instinct, the brigands

halted in a little dell, through which a mountain torrent flowed noisily, and where the walls of the ravine arose steeply on either side, bristling with stunted trees and shrubbery.

It was past noon, and the sun's rays were withdrawn from the depths of the gulch which they had temporarily lighted. There was a damp in the air, and a sort of twilight reigned. The spot seemed a sepulchre.

Olla, who had carefully marked the route by which she had been brought, examined the little dell curiously.

The voice of the brigand chief interrupted her scrutiny.

"Genarro, let the two servants be blindfolded," commanded the Red Carvelli.

One of the brigands produced from his capacious pockets a supply of red woolen cloth. He rode up to Popley, who, bound and helpless, could of course offer no resistance, and proceeded to bind a heavy band of the cloth over Popley's eyes. This operation was performed so skillfully that its victim could not distinguish even a ray of light when it was concluded.

Mrs. Popley was then blinded in a similar manner.

Genarro then rode toward Olla, who backed her horse, her great midnight eyes flashing defiance at him.

"Don't you dare to touch me!" she cried haughtily. "Your hands off, if you please."

"Back, Genarro!" shouted the brigand chief. "Do not lay hands on the lady."

Genarro, a low-browed ruffian, retreated slowly, in some confusion, and then moved toward Tressilian.

"You need not bind his eyes either," said the brigand chief. "He is a helpless imbecile. And, besides, it is doubtful if he ever leaves the retreat."

Genarro inclined his head, and retreated to his place at the rear of the little cavalcade.

The Red Carvelli, giving the signal to resume the march, rode on through the little dell and entered the narrow throat or gorge beyond.

Continuing their course through the gorge for the distance of a half mile, the brigands came to a halt, and prepared to dismount.

Evidently they had arrived at their journey's end.

A silver whistle was suspended by a cord around the neck of the brigand chief. He raised the whistle to his lips and blew upon it a shrill call, clear and piercing.

A similar call came in response, seeming to find vent from the solid wall at their right.

"All is well," said the Red Carvelli, leaping from his saddle. "We will go on."

His followers all dismounted, and assisted the captives to the ground.

Genarro led away the horses further up the gorge, soon disappearing from Olla's view behind a projecting rock.

"Come," said Carvelli, taking Olla's hand in his strong grasp. "This way."

He led her toward the steep, straight wall, and Olla now perceived that its surface was irregular, and that secure footholds were afforded in its face, although they were not apparent to an ordinary observer.

The brigand chief climbed the rock with the agility of a chamois. Shaking off his grasp, Olla followed him, not once losing her footing, and behind her came poor Guy Tressilian, the remaining brigands, and the Popleys.

At a distance of some twenty feet from the bottom of the gorge, a rock projected from the solid wall, completely screening an aperture behind it. This aperture it appeared, was the entrance to a cavern extending into

the bowels of the mountain. A more cleverly concealed retreat could not have been imagined, for it was not until they were within five feet of it that keen-eyed Olla even detected the existence of the opening. And a more secure retreat also could not have been devised, for one man, sheltered by the door-like projection covering the aperture completely, could have held a besieging army at bay.

Carvelli mounted to the aperture, disappeared behind the rock projection, and halted until Olla had gained his side.

"Now give me your hand," he said.

"Thank you, no," said Olla independently. "You may lead and I will follow, but I won't touch your hand, if you please."

"You are a regular little vixen," observed the brigand chief admiringly. "A little shrew—a perfect young termagant. But you suit me. I never did like your milk-and-water women, one of the clinging vine sort, that wheedle and cloy you with their sickish sweetness. Give me an independent, spirited creature, who dares to say 'I will' and 'I won't,' and who won't stand nonsense from anybody—like you, in short, Signorina."

"Thanks for your good opinion," said Olla coolly. "And now, if you'll lead on, we will penetrate into your robber den. Give me your hand, Jasper," she added, addressing Tressilian, who had come up.

Carvelli entered the aperture, which was high enough to permit his ingress in a nearly upright position. Olla crept in after him, holding Tressilian's hand. The brigands, with the remaining prisoners, brought up the rear.

The passage was but a few feet in length, and gave admittance into a dim, rocky vestibule, where a lamp,

secured to the side wall, was burning, and where a man, in the picturesque costume of the brigands, was waiting, evidently on duty as sentinel. It was he who had responded to his leader's shrill call.

"Had you good luck, Captain?" asked the guard, regarding the prisoners narrowly.

"Very good. Did you ever know me to fail?" demanded the chief, good-humoredly.

The guard replied heartily in the negative, and the chief traversed the vestibule, opened a door hung in the rocky wall, and passed into an inner chamber.

This was the principal cavern of the robber's retreat.

It was a long, high apartment, irregular in shape, with irregular walls and irregular ceiling. It was lighted by a dozen lanterns which depended by rude chains from the rocks overhead; and also by a great fire which blazed and burned at the side of the chamber, dispensing a great heat, which dissipated the chill peculiar to a subterranean room.

The cavern was occupied by some fifteen men, all dressed in the manner we have described as characterizing Olla's captors. A stranger crew than this it would have been hard to find. On every swarthy brow of the assembly was the brand of the outlaw. Every pair of eyes had in them the reckless, hunted, dare-devil look that proclaimed their social position. They looked like so many Cains and Ishmaels—their hands against every man, and every man's hand against them. Desperate, hardened and lawless, they were social pariahs, and delighted in being so.

They were lounging about, engaged in various occupations, but all paused and looked up as the Captain entered, followed by his prisoners and followers.

In an instant a busy hum of voices, in questioning and response, filled the great cavern.

"Who is she? who is she?" was the cry that rang louder than the rest, as the outlaws marked the slight figure of the chief captive. "A princess? A great lady?"

Olla withdrew herself from the bustle and clamor, clinging tightly to Tressilian's hand, and surveyed the groups with a cool and dauntless gaze.

It may be that her heart sank within her; it is certain that she comprehended all her peril; but there was no betrayal of fear in her attitude or expression. Her small head, with its jetty tresses, was haughtily poised on the slender neck, and a smile of bitterness and scorn curved her lips.

The brigand chief did not appear to relish the sensation caused among this rude gang by her glorious beauty; nor did he appear pleased with the admiring exclamations, that resounded on every side. The girl he meant as his own prize, and already he was jealous of every admiring glance bestowed upon her.

"Let the girl alone!" he growled. "She is tired, and—and scared—"

A derisive laugh rang through the cavern, and this deepened into a positive shout as Olla's lip curled in indignant defiance.

"*She* scared!" cried the brigand who was second in command to Carvelli. "She is about as scared as a young lioness when she first sees her puny enemies. Scared? Not much!"

It was evident that Olla's courage had excited as great an admiration as her beauty.

The face of the brigand chief flushed with annoyance.

"Give me a lantern," he said. "I will show the prisoners to their cells."

A lantern was brought to him, and bidding Olla fol-

low him, he stalked down the length of the great cavern, and led the way into a passage beyond.

The captive followed, still clinging to Tressilian's hand. The two Popleys, whose bonds had been removed and whose eyes had been unbandaged on entering the underground apartment, also followed in silence and with faces darkened by a terrible gloom.

The inner passage was short, and gave admittance into a nearly circular chamber, where were stored boxes, barrels and bales, all filled with the acquisitions of Carvelli's long years of plunder.

Off this circular room several massive wooden doors opened. These were all provided with stout chains and padlocks.

The brigand chief opened one of these doors and motioned Olla to enter. The young girl peeped in warily. It was a bare and gloomy little cell, without outlet other than the door at whose threshold they stood.

"No," said Olla gravely, "that one won't do. Show us the others."

Carvelli stared at her in amazement.

"It won't do?" he ejaculated.

"Not by any means," said Olla, shaking her head. "I think too much of myself to go into a den like that. But of course you don't know how to treat a lady. One can't expect to make a silk purse out of the ear of a porine quadruped!"

Carvelli looked bewildered.

"The—the room don't suit you then?" he ejaculated.

"Of course it don't."

"Perhaps the Signorina takes this to be the Hotel delle Crocelli," suggested the brigand chief, with a mocking sarcasm.

"Oh, no, I am not so 'scared' as that," said Olla

quietly. "I take it to be a refuge of outlaws, but you certainly must have stolen enough to be able to fit out a room decently. And, besides," she added, coming to the point, "I won't be separated from my friends!"

"You won't, eh?"

"No, I won't," declared Olla coolly, sitting down upon a bale of woolen blankets that was conveniently at hand. "You must give us rooms adjoining, with the door unlocked between—"

"She *does* take this to be the Hotel delle Crocelli," cried Carvelli, turning up his eyes. "Signorina, I regret that I cannot accommodate you in the manner you desire—"

"Then we'll stay here!" interrupted the little lady, who saw but one way to effectually manage her savage captor, and that way was to treat him with bold defiance. "I dare say that we can manage to get along in this apartment for the short period of our stay."

Carvelli grinned.

"Well," he said, "as you are so determined, I must give in. But you are the first person I ever yielded to, Miladi."

He glanced around the room. There were three or four of the brigands—of the number of those who had assisted in Olla's capture—standing about near the mouth of the passage. They were all witnessing with delight the subjugation of their dreaded master by the willful little foreigner.

"Doctor," called the chief.

One of the men, a wiry little ruffian, sprang forward.

Carvelli tossed him a bunch of keys.

"Open the doors of the two rooms that adjoin each other," commanded the chief. "And you may spread

a carpet in one of the rooms. And you may put a pile of soft blankets in one room—”

“In both rooms, Doctor,” interposed Olla, with the air of mistress.

The Doctor, as he was styled, he being the physician of the company and possessed of a certain rude skill in surgery, looked inquiringly at his master. The latter bit his lips, as he said :

“In both rooms then. And you may cover the walls with carpet or blankets to make the place warmer. Boys, turn in and help. Be lively now.”

The three or four brigands, under the Doctor's leadership, procured lanterns from the main cavern and set to work to prepare the chambers indicated for the proposed occupancy.

Carvelli sat down near Olla and Tressilian, wiping his brows.

A few minutes sufficed to furnish the two cells, and the Doctor, announcing the completion of his task, the chief led his prisoners to their rooms.

They were small and of similar size, some eighteen feet square, as nearly as might be measured. The walls of one of the rooms were draped with woolen blankets. A carpet loosely laid down covered the floor. A great pile of white and fleecy blankets were heaped up in one corner, and a table and several chairs comprised the furniture.

An open door led from this room into that adjoining. This latter apartment, designed for the use of Tressilian and Popley, contained only a great pile of blankets and a couple of chairs. Each room was provided with a lantern, which gave a sickly glare.

“This is the best we can do, Signorina,” said Carvelli, ushering the prisoners into their cells. “You can visit each other as much as you choose. I don't intend

to be very hard on you unless you compel me to be. Make yourselves at home. I will come in to see you after dinner."

He bowed and withdrew, locking the doors of both the cells.

Tressilian sat down on the nearest chair, looking at Olla, with a vague bewilderment. Popley and Mrs. Popley regarded their young mistress in dismay, the latter giving way to a nervous fit of weeping.

"We are worse off than we were in Sicily," she cried. "What can this villain mean to do with us? Oh, Miss Olla, he has fallen in love with you, and he is a million times worse than Mr. Gower."

"I don't know," said Olla meditatively. "He is bolder, to be sure. Well, perhaps he is worse."

"Thank Heaven you are so brave, Miss Olla," said Jim Popley, whose usually ruddy face was quite pale. "Almost any one else would have cried and screamed—"

"And what good would that have done?" demanded Olla. "When one is in danger one needs all one's wits. If I had wept and pleaded, this Red Carvelii, as he calls himself, would have oppressed us all, robbed us, perhaps killed us. It is not my way nor my nature to sit down and cry when I want all my courage and coolness, and as to allowing that head demon to see that I am afraid of him, I have too much self-respect and spirit to do it."

"What will be your fate, Miss Olla?" sobbed the poor old nurse.

"God above knows that," responded Olla, with a reverent look upward. "But as the matter is bad enough in itself, don't let us make it worse, dear Mrs. Popley, by crying ourselves sick. And don't let us gratify that old wretch by seeming frightened. If we

carry a high hand, we shall fare better than otherwise. The prospect of escape, I admit, looks a little dubious, but let us hope for the best. God has not forsaken us."

She kissed the tear-stained face of her old nurse, and the latter, under the influence of Olla's bright hopefulness, began to appear more cheerful. Jim Popley also, in spite of the depressing situation, began to throw aside, or possibly conceal, his despondency.

"How pale and tired poor Jasper looks," said Olla, marking the appearance of poor Guy Tressilian. "His bandage is displaced over his wound. And where is his hat?"

"It was lost when we were captured," said Popley.

"He was behind me and I did not notice that his hat was gone," said Olla. "Can the sun have affected his head?"

"I think not," answered Popley. "I will dress his wound, and put on the bandages in better shape."

He would have removed Tressilian into the inner room, but Olla requested him to remain. Popley took off the bandages carefully and laid bare the gaping, unhealed wound in the midst of the tawny locks of hair.

He was about to apply some healing salve, when the door was unlocked and opened, and the "Doctor" came in, bearing a big wooden tray of food.

"What have you there?" he asked, depositing the tray on the table.

Popley's command of the Italian language not being adequate to the occasion, Olla answered:

"The gentleman received a severe wound on the head some weeks since. He was hurled by the waves, in a shipwreck, against a sharp rock. His brain is paralyzed!"

"Ah!" said the doctor, his professional interest

excited. "I suppose I've treated more wounds in the head than any other man in Italy. I studied to be a doctor once. It was at Milan. I had a regular genius for surgery, but I liked a wild life, and joined the band of the Red Carvelli. And here I have more broken heads to mend than I could have in any city. Odd how everybody, in a fight, aims at the head; isn't it? I dare say now, I could cure this friend of yours."

"I think not," said Olla. "Dr. Spezzo of Palermo, the great Sicilian doctor, could do nothing for him."

"Dr. Spezzo has not had my experience in mending broken heads," said the brigand doctor loftily. "Let me look at the gentleman's head."

Popley stepped aside to give him place.

"Just hold the lantern this way," said the doctor.

Popley took down the lantern and held it so that the rays fell full upon the gaping wound.

"A bad wound!" ejaculated the doctor. "Very bad. No wonder Dr. Spezzo gave him up. Did the doctor say what was the matter in this case?"

"He said that the brain was paralyzed, or some such thing," said Olla.

"Nonsense. These big doctors like to treat you to big words. I can see all the trouble, Signorina. A piece of the skull is driven in on the brain. I might be able to help him; I don't know. But you could find some great English or French doctor that could restore him no doubt."

A glow of hope lit up Olla's face.

"You think he is not hopelessly imbecile then?" she cried.

"I don't think he is. Of course, there are chances against his complete recovery; a good many chances; but I think he stands a good fair chance of getting well."

If the Signorina would allow me to probe the wound, or to make a fair examination of it, I might help him."

Olla hesitated. She studied the man's face, but she saw in it only a professional zeal. Her anxiety forced her to consent to the examination, especially as she believed the doctor to be honest, and not actuated by a desire to harm her charge.

"You may examine it," she said slowly. "But don't hurt him."

The doctor drew from his pocket a case of surgical instruments, and selected one resembling a probe. He entered upon his task of examining Tressilian's wound with a keen eye and a steady hand.

"A bad case," he muttered. "I see the cause of the trouble, but I don't think I can reach it. Steady your hand there, you Inglese!"

He continued his examination, Guy submitting to the pain with the patience that had distinguished him since his affliction had overtaken him. Olla watched the scene, pale as death, her hands clasped, her lips parted, her eyes having a wild and frightened gaze. Mrs. Popley covered her face with her hands.

A few moments dragged on, seeming like an eternity to Olla.

Then came a cry of joy from the doctor, followed by a shrill cry of agony from Guy Tressilian.

At the same moment, Tressilian sprang from his chair, bounded forward, and fell in a dead swoon upon the floor.

The doctor wiped his blood-stained instrument upon his jacket, and restored it to his case.

"I haven't cured him!" he exclaimed. "I raised the depressed piece of skull a little, Signorina, but it needs skill greater than mine to carry the operation through successfully. If you ever get out of here, and

he lives, take him to some great surgeon. As for him now," he added seriously, "I have either helped him or killed him, I don't know which."

Olla gave a great cry of terror. Popley set down his lantern and lifted poor Guy, carrying him to the pile of blankets, on which he laid him. The doctor approached the couch and looked down upon the insensible man. Then, muttering that he could do nothing more, and that he would not have the captain know what he had already done, he stole out of the cell softly, and with a terrified face, and locked the door behind him.

"He is dying!" moaned Olla, in all the anguish and horror of a great grief. "And I have killed him! Why did I let that charlatan touch him? Oh, Jasper! Jasper!"

She knelt down beside him and laid her hand upon the still breast. He looked as if he were dead, lying white and cold and rigid. The Popleys gathered close to their young mistress, struck dumb by the chill horror of the scene. And the three waited for some change in the appearance of the Baronet's son. Would the coming change be the last great change—that of death?

CHAPTER IV.

PALESTRO ON LOWDER'S TRAIL.

Lipari, the driver of the voiture in which Olla and her party had started, as they supposed for the Termoli, after betraying his passengers into the hands of the Red Carvelli and his men, made his way back on the

road to Naples until he reached a small hamlet, where he halted an hour to rest and refresh himself and his horses.

At the end of the period mentioned, he resumed his journey, arriving within sight of the Vesuvius Inn at about nine o'clock in the evening, his horses exhausted with the long, hard journey.

The inn doors were open. The light streamed out from windows and door, and Lipari could hear the voices of the usual inn loungers. A few men sat by the tables under the mulberry-tree, smoking and drinking. Palestro, the ex-scrivener, was gliding about among his out-of-door guests, a big white apron enveloping his figure, and a tray of bottles and glasses on his arm.

Lipari drove slowly past, whistling a bar of a popular melody. Palestro looked up at him, started almost imperceptibly, glanced at the empty voiture, and made a significant gesture with his hand, to which Lipari responded in kind. This was a signal between the precious pair that their plots had been successful, and that Olla and Tressilian were in the hands of the brigands.

Palestro continued to wait upon his guests. Lipari drove on, disappearing down the road that led to the town. After a little, the ex-scrivener stole into the inn, signalled Giuditta to follow him into the pantry, and there informed her of Lipari's success.

"Everything went right," he muttered jubilantly. "The girl is in Giuseppe's hands. And one who has once felt the grip of the Red Carvelli knows that it cannot be lightly shaken off. He'll get a good ransom for her, which we shall share, and the Inglese imbecile is our own game. There is no one to interfere with our gains from him."

The pair exulted over their good fortune for some minutes, and then, constrained by business and policy, separated, returning to their customers.

At eleven o'clock, as was usual, all was still at the Vesuvius Inn. The customers had all departed ; Giacomo had gone to bed ; and Palestro and Giuditta sat alone in their dim kitchen, counting the earnings of the day, and discussing the situation of Tressilian.

They were thus engaged when a low knock was heard on the rear door. Giuditta arose, and admitted Lipari, the driver of the voiture. He told his story minutely, describing the scene of the attack and the capture of the prisoners, dilating upon the spirit of the Inglese girl and answering a host of questions breathlessly put to him by the innkeepers. When he had concluded, he was liberally treated to wine and cigars, and he arose, well satisfied, to take his departure.

"The captain's always liberal," he observed, lighting a cigar at the guttering candle. "He will make this all right when I see him, which will be next week, I suppose. Better warn him, Signora Giuditta, that there's hot talk about him over at Naples, and the troops are bound to set out on an expedition against him in a day or two. But he's safe at the retreat. Good-night to you, Signora, and Signore."

He put his cigar in his mouth and departed.

Giuditta locked the door after him, and came and sat down upon a hard chair, facing her husband.

"Well," she said, "our golden goose is caged."

"It is indeed," said Palestro.

The pair looked at each other keenly.

"That imbecile is a gold mine to us, if we work him rightly," declared Giuditta.

"Yes ; and I would defy all the troops of Italy to release him !" said Palestro. "He is where we wanted

him ; safe under our own eye, as one might say, with no one to help or befriend him. He is caged for life !”

“ You think,” said Giuditta, in a low voice, “ that he is this Sir Tresolino’s brother ?”

“ I do. Milord Sir Tresolino pretended that he was but his travelling companion, but I think differently. See the arguments. The two men look alike, as though they were indeed brothers. This sick one is the handsomest, the most gentlemanly. He is gentlemanly to the core, for a little outside varnish would have rubbed off after his illness. He is in no condition to affect what he is not by nature. And I marked a little fact. The linen of this imbecile Inglese was very fine and dainty ; his clothes of the best Paris cut ; and in all his appearance there was that which betokened one accustomed to wealth. No, no ; this imbecile Inglese is no mere hired travelling companion. I believe him to be the elder brother of the other.”

“ The elder brother ?”

“ Yes. Do you not know the Inglese laws ? It is that the elder son inherits his father’s title, wealth, everything. The younger son works for a living usually, unless his mother kindly dies and leaves him any little money she may have in her own right. Now, I think that when this imbecile Inglese was injured, his brother went home and gave out that he was dead, and entered into possession of this one’s heritage. The thing is simple. I would have done it myself !”

Giuditta’s eyes sparkled greedily.

“ I think you are right, Jacopo,” she cried. “ And now, how are we to work our gold mine ? Of course you must go to England.”

“ Of course. I must start by the 6.30 train in the morning, as there is no boat on Friday for Marseilles. I will go to England, to Gloucester, find Milord Sir

Tresolino, and when I return to you, Giuditta, I shall come home a rich man !”

“How well that you understand the Inglese language !” said Giuditta. “You have been a courier, and are used to travel. You will manage this business finely. Were you ever in England ?”

“I went to London once. I can travel anywhere.”

“I don't doubt it. Be keen with this Inglese, Jacopo,” enjoined Giuditta. “He is sharp, but do you be sharper. Cut him, instead of letting him cut you !”

The couple talked long, and Palestro's course was laid out for him plainly by Giuditta, who regretted that she could not leave the inn to accompany him. A sum amounting to twenty pounds was counted out from their joint purse, to defray the expenses of Palestro's journey, and to provide against contingencies, and they lost themselves in their gorgeous prospects, and planned what they would do with the fortune the ex-scrivener would bring back from England.

The candle burned out at last, and they were left in darkness, but still they talked on. It was nearly two o'clock when they crept up to bed, but their imaginations were too excited to permit them to sleep, and they continued their discussion until the dawn, and it was time to be astir.

Giuditta packed a small valise for her husband, Giacomo was called up to harness the horse, and at a quarter to six the ex-scrivener, accompanied by his “half-wit” brother-in-law, set out for Naples.

And at half-past six o'clock of that sunny winter morning, Palestro, seated in a second-class compartment of the railway train, left Naples for England, via Rome and Leghorn.

We need not dwell upon the small incidents of Pales-

tro's journey by sea and land, to the country he expected would prove his Eldorado.

Some five days later, not at all jaded, the wiry little Italian arrived at Gloucester. It was the morning of a day unusually fine for the country and the season. He made his way on foot from the railway station to a small coffee-house in a by-street, kept by a Frenchman, seeming to find a place suited to his tastes and purse by a sort of instinct.

He called for a room, which was provided him. He changed his linen, brushed out his crisp black locks, burnished the rings in his ears, and brushed his garments. His toilet was made. He descended to the coffee-room, and called for breakfast.

The French proprietor, thinking possibly that the Italian was a newly-arrived compatriot, approached him when he had nearly finished his breakfast, and inquired with French politeness if he were not a stranger, and if any attention could be shown him.

"Yes, I am a stranger in Gloucester," said the scrivener, in French. "But I ask no attentions, Signore. I leave town immediately. I was formerly a courier. I know many English gentlemen. I knew one Sir Tresolino, a rich Milord, who lived in this place. You may perhaps have heard of him?" and he arched his brows inquisitively.

"I never heard the name," responded the Frenchman, shaking his head. "Sir Tresolino what? Or what Sir Tresolino?"

"That was all," affirmed Palestro. "Sir Tresolino."

"Tresolino is not an English name," replied the Frenchman, "and you have not quite caught the spirit of the language—the genius of the people, as one might say. It is necessary to give the two names after the

Sir. You do not say Sir Smeet, but Sir John Smeet. Comprehend?"

Palestro nodded.

"I see," he muttered. "But the name of Tresolino must be known. The gentleman is a Milord."

"Oh, then it will be easy to find him," said the Frenchman cheerfully. "You wish much to find him?"

"Yes. I thought perhaps I might get a situation with him. If not, I can go back to London," declared Palestro, not willing that the importance of his business should transpire. "I will hear of him at some draper's, mercer's, tailor's,—some shop of some sort."

"A stationer's, perhaps," suggested the Frenchman. "Or at the post-office."

Palestro's face lighted up with a sudden glow.

"Yes, that is it!" he ejaculated. "Thanks, Signore."

He paid his bill, inquired the way to the post-office, and sauntered out into the street, leaving his portman-teau until he should return for it.

On his way to the post-office, he stopped in at a stationer's shop and made inquiries after "a rich Milord, one Sir Tresolino," but the inquiry only provoked derisive laughter and elicited no information, and he hurried out and on, with a feeling that the task on which he had entered was of no ordinary magnitude.

Making his way to the delivery-box of the post-office, and into the presence of the clerk, a tall young man with his hair parted in the middle, the scent of cigars about his garments, mingled with that of perfumery, and a manner calculated to strike the ordinary intruder with a species of awe, it was so pert and consequential, the ex-scrivener inquired:

"Can you give me the address of one Sir Tresolino, who lives in Gloucester—"

"Know no such person," interrupted the clerk curtly.

Palestro's heart grew faint.

"Not know him?" he gasped.

"No, sir," and the clerk turned away.

A sudden idea came to the Italian.

"Stay!" he called, putting out his hand. "Can you give me the address of one Horroville, John Horroville?"

"Cannot do it, sir. We cannot keep track of every person who has letters come to this office. You had better move on, sir. Don't you see that lady behind you? Move on!"

And Palestro moved on, feeling as if a blow had been dealt him from which he would never recover.

He went out into the open air, oppressed for breath. The cold wind revived him. He walked slowly up and down the street pondering the situation.

"No one knows him under either name he gave," thought the ex-scrivener. "His name is perhaps different from either. He has cheated me. What is to be done now?"

He reflected intently.

"It is time for him to expect a letter from me," he mused. "It is ten days since he got a line from me. And before that I wrote him regularly. He will be anxious. He will think something has happened to the imbecile Inglese. I may safely calculate that he will come for a letter to-day. And if not to-day then to-morrow. I will be on the watch. He shall not escape me.

He set his lips together grimly, and returned to the post-office. He slouched his hat over his eyes, and wound his gray woolen muffler over the lower part of his face. Stationing himself carelessly within view of the delivery-box, he waited.

An hour passed—two hours. The disguised watcher had the patience of a sleuth-hound, and showed no sign of fatigue.

It was wearing on toward noon, and the thin tide of people was still flowing and ebbing, when a tall, slender figure, muffled in a long greatcoat, the collar turned up over his ears, his hat drawn down over his brows, after a careless fashion, sauntered with a certain indolent grace into the post-office.

For the first time since he had commenced his lonely watch, Palestro started. His eyes gleamed.

"It is he!" he whispered, and his face paled with his great joy and prospective triumph.

Unconscious of the malignant espionage, Jasper Lowder—for the muffled stranger was he—approached the box, and asked in a low tone, which was perfectly audible to the breathless listener:

"Anything for John Harroville?"

The clerk make an investigation.

"Nothing, sir," he answered.

"You are quite sure?" questioned Lowder, in a voice still lower, and having in it a suspicion of anxiety.

"Quite sure," declared the clerk. "There is nothing for you."

Lowder turned away and left the building.

Palestro strode after him with the stealthiness of a cat.

"Now to see where he goes!" he muttered. "I'll follow him the world over but that I unearth him in his burrow! He is cunning, but I will be more cunning! Lead on Milord Sir Tresolino! I follow!"

Jasper Lowder hurried down the street, and after him, like his shadow, crept his spy and enemy.



CHAPTER V.

DISCOVERED.

Jasper Lowder, all unconscious of hostile pursuit, walked hurriedly down the narrow city street, after his visit to the Gloucester post-office, and Jacopo Palestro, the Palermo ex-scrivener, continued to glide after him like his shadow.

Gradually Lowder's pace slackened, and he raised his hat, and turned down his coat collar, thus flinging off the slight disguise he always affected when on his secret expeditions to the post-office.

There was a shade of anxiety upon the brow of the treacherous usurper, as there had been in his voice when reiterating his inquiry for letters. He had visited the post-office daily for the last three days, in the hope and expectation of receiving a letter from Palestro, and the non-arrival of the expected missive inspired him with a vague sense of peril. On the previous day he had received, instead of the letter he desired, a long and loving epistle from poor Hester, who was striving hard to wait contentedly at her dreary northern refuge of Gloam Fell, where she had now been domiciled nearly a week.

"Can anything have happened?" thought Lowder,

with a shiver. "Can some tourist have recognized Tressilian? Can he have wandered off the rocks and been drowned? Ah, if it might be so! It would be just my good luck to have Tressilian die! And when he dies, the last shadow fades from my path."

His thoughts and hopes, sinister as they were, brought a flush to his cheeks and a hopeful gleam to his eyes.

It will be noticed that he did not count poor, simple, loving Hester as an obstacle in the way of his successes, or even of a fraudulent second marriage under his present assumed name. He knew but too well that his gentle young wife would sacrifice her life before willingly bringing any harm upon him. And he counted upon keeping her in ignorance of his present false position and pretensions.

As we have said, it was nearly a week since Jasper Lowder had sequestered his wife among the dreary wilds of the Cheviot Hills in Northumberland. After leaving Hester at Gloam Fell, he had hastened back to Gloucester and Tressilian Court, arriving home some thirty hours after his departure from it. No suspicion had been excited in the minds of Sir Arthur Tressilian or Blanche that anything was wrong with the supposed Guy. Lowder told them that he had been to see "poor Mrs. Lowder" off for the Continent, and no one questioned that he had visited London, and on the errand specified. Both Sir Arthur and Blanche had commended his thoughtful kindness, and it was easy to see that Lowder stood higher in their esteem than before.

Taking advantage of the favorable impression he had thus made, he had urged his suit upon Blanche with increased ardor, and the result of his pleadings was that the Baronet's young ward had shyly consented to appoint the day for the proposed marriage. Sir Arthur

Tressilian had been called into the consultation, and despite his misgivings and his smouldering distrust of his supposed son, he had acquiesced in Blanche's decision, and the sixth day of February, not two months distant, had been selected as the bridal day.

The Baronet was not in favor of long engagements. He told himself that the faults he had observed in the character of the pretended Guy might be the result of physical weakness and want of memory, consequent upon the shock and injury received in that terrible shipwreck on the Sicilian coast. He was anxious to witness the consummation of the marriage which should place the burial stone upon the grave of his own dead hopes, but he was more than all solicitous for the happiness of Blanche. He marked the ardor of Lowder's love for her, and believed that her affection and influence would ennoble the character he begun to fear was sadly warped.

The path of the usurper, strewn with flowers, seemed leading straight to the desired goal. Everything went well with him. No sooner had an obstacle arisen in his path than he had swept it aside as if it had been a cobweb. And now the marriage-day was appointed which was to give to his perjured arms a second bride while the first still lived.

Would this monstrous wrong to two tender, innocent women be permitted? Would not the justice of Heaven overtake the perjurer and villain before these lovely lives should be wrecked?

Jasper Lowder, exulting in his triumph, had no fear of Heaven's justice.

The interval before the wedding being short, the preparations for it were immediately inaugurated. Blanche and her guardian had therefore accompanied Lowder to Gloucester on this present occasion, the

former to transact shopping, the Baronet to procure some needed books for his library, and to order up from London some choice gifts for his darling.

Thoughts of his triumphs came to Lowder, soon dissipating his anxieties.

"If anything had gone wrong with Tressilian," he thought, "Palestro would have written. There was simply nothing to write. I have been foolish to experience even a moment's disquiet. The fact is, I am dizzy with my successes."

He smiled complacently as he walked on, turning into a fashionable street, up which he strolled with the air of a fashionable loungeur.

And, after him, never losing sight of him, glided Palestro.

Lowder made his way in the direction of a large dry goods establishment, before which the Tressilian barouche, a plain, unpretending, but luxurious vehicle, was in waiting.

As Lowder approached the barouche from one direction, Sir Arthur approached it from another. The two met at the carriage step.

"Have you transacted all your business, Guy?" inquired the Baronet.

"All, sir. I had very little to do," was the response. "Are you ready to return home?"

"Quite ready. Blanche said she required but a couple of hours this morning, and the two hours have expired. She will soon come out. We may as well take our seats."

As Sir Arthur spoke, he entered the silk-lined carriage, depositing his small purchase of books under the seat. Lowder stood hesitatingly, with one foot on the carriage-step.

"I think I'll go into the shop and look for Blanche," he remarked. "There is no hurry for our return."

And if there is anything in the world I like to see, it is a pretty woman up to her eyes in delicate silks and laces, and in all the ecstasy of shopping with a full purse !”

Sir Arthur smiled, and Lowder sauntered into the establishment. The Baronet took out one of his new books and tried to interest himself in its pages, but somehow the dainty face of Blanche seemed to dance before his eyes, to the exclusion of the printed words of wisdom.

Palestro walked slowly past the carriage, and looked keenly and furtively at the handsome, stalwart Baronet. Then he sauntered back again, continuing his scrutiny, and came to a halt at a little distance, where he leaned idly against a lamp-post, apparently waiting for some one, yet keeping a close watch upon the shop door.

Presently Lowder came out again, with Blanche leaning upon his arm.

Palestro looked at the young girl sharply, and his eyes gleamed as he marked her beauty and rich attire. In her costume of violet velvet, with a violet velvet hat, enriched with plumes, perched above her golden tresses and her fair and lovely face bright with animation, Blanche presented a charming picture, at the contemplation of which the heavy jaws of the ex-scrivener parted in admiration.

“A regular aristocrat, per Bacco !” he muttered. “Is she his sister ? They look like lovers.”

He moved a little nearer the carriage, keeping his face averted, and listening, hoping for some chance word from Lowder.

“Have I kept you waiting long, Guardy ?” he heard the young girl ask, in a sweet, chirping voice, as Lowder helped her into the barouche. “I got bewildered between two rival silks, each blue, and each prettier

than the other. Guy kindly came to cut the Gordian knot by choosing for me. Are you ready to go home?"

She sank down on the silken cushions, looking dainty and sweet in her violet velvet and rich ermines, and Lowder entered after her, seating himself opposite her. A shopman ran out with a parcel, which was stowed away, and he closed the low door, and Lowder called out in an indolent voice to the driver :

"Home!"

The next instant the horses, tall, stylish, fat carriage horses, slow, but stately of motion, moved away at a walk.

Palestro approached the shopman, who stood gazing after the retreating carriage with all the awe and veneration felt by lower-class Britons for rank and wealth.

"Can you tell me, sir," asked the ex-scrivener, removing his hat and bowing deeply, "the name of the noble gentleman in yonder carriage?"

Palestro's obsequiousness flattered the shopman.

"That is Sir Arthur Tressilian of Tressilian Court," he said.

"Ah!" said Palestro. "And the young man, who is he?"

"Mr. Tressilian, Sir Arthur's son."

The shopman being called at this juncture, abruptly returned to his duties, leaving Palestro to pursue his investigations in some other quarter.

"I must not lose sight of him," thought the wary scrivener. "It will be the safest to follow him to his home."

The carriage being still within sight, he hurried after it at a brisk walk. Up one street and down another, and out toward the open country, went the slow barouche, and behind it, at a good loping gait, came Jacopo Palestro.

Mile after mile was thus passed, the pursuer now walking, now running. Notwithstanding the chilliness of the air, he was soon dripping with perspiration. He panted for breath. His greatcoat became burdensome upon his back, and he took it off, carrying it upon his arm. He loosened his muffler and neckcloth, and, thus stripped for the race, he kept on and on, now and then losing sight of the Tressilian barouche, now and then sitting down upon some wayside stone, or under some wayside hedge, to rest, but not once faltering in his grim pursuit.

It was a long, hard journey, but it came to an end at last. Palestro was weary and footsore, his steps were flagging, and he was beginning to curse his own waning strength and the man who was unconsciously leading him this wild chase, when the hoary walls of Tressilian Court gleamed through the vistas of the park, and the lodge gates swung wide on their hinges, and the carriage turned leisurely into the home grounds.

"Housed at last!" muttered Palestro, wiping his brows with his red silk handkerchief. "I've tracked my game to his burrow. And a fine time I've had of it—a steady three hours' trot; but he shall pay me for it. Ah, yes, he shall pay!"

He continued his walk more slowly, putting on his greatcoat and muffler.

A few minutes' further exertion brought him to the pretty, picturesque lodge which guarded the tall bronze gates at the road end of the avenue leading up to Tressilian Court. The lodge was built of gray stone, was draped with clinging ivy vines, and had a small window projecting into the road. There was a door, with a hood also fronting the road.

Palestro, after a moment's debate with himself, walked boldly up to the door of the lodge and knocked.

The lodge-keeper's wife, a motherly, elderly woman, opened the door, demanding what he wanted.

"I am very tired," said the ex-scrivener, humbly and deprecatingly. "I have come a long distance. Will you give me leave to sit by your fire for a few minutes?"

The woman surveyed him sharply. She was no friend to tramps, but Palestro's evident fatigue appealed to her native kindness. He was decently dressed, a foreigner evidently, and his sallow face was almost pale with weariness. She decided to admit him.

"Come in, sir, and take a seat by the fire," she said, opening her door widely.

Palestro bowed gratefully and entered the pretty, square room, with its floor laid in a mosaic pattern with party-colored woods, its great wood fire, sending out both light and heat, and its bright windows looking out at one side upon the road, and at another side upon the beautiful grounds of Tressilian Court.

The woman placed a tall-backed chair at the corner of the hearth, and Palestro took off his outer wrappings and sat down, stretching out his long bony hands to the blaze. The lodge-keeper resumed the seat she had vacated at his knock, and took up again a big wooden tray filled with apples, which she was paring.

For a few minutes the ex-scrivener was silent, enjoying the delicious rest and heat after his long journey. But presently he spoke upon the subject nearest his heart.

"This is a magnificent place, Signora," he observed, as his small, peering eyes glanced into the perfectly kept grounds of the Court. "A Prince might live here."

"Indeed he might, and be proud of the place!" returned the lodge-keeper proudly, feeling herself identified with the Tressilian glories. "There an't a finer place in Gloucestershire, if I do say it; nor an older or better

family than Sir Arthur Tressilian's. The first Tressilian was a Norman, and came over with William the Conqueror?"

She made this assertion with a triumphant air, and Palestro assumed a look of reverence, although he was ignorant of the very name of William the Conqueror, and had not the slightest idea that nearly every family in England, with the least pretensions to being of consequence, claimed that its remote ancestor had come over in the train of the conquering William.

"Is it possible?" he ejaculated, with increasing awe. "This Sir Tresolino must be a great Milord. Is he rich?"

"Rich?" said the lodge-keeper. "His rent-roll might befit a duke! He is one of the richest men in the county."

Palestro's eyes gleamed, and he rubbed his hands softly together.

"So rich!" he muttered. "A carriage passed me on this side of the village with a lady and two gentlemen in, and it turned into these grounds. Perhaps that was Milord Sir Tresolino's carriage?"

"Yes, it was," returned the woman, pleased at the title applied to her well-loved master. "Sir Arthur has been to Gloucester this morning, and came home a few minutes before you came up."

"He looks young and very handsome," said the artful Italian, in an indifferent tone. "I suppose the young man was his brother, and the young lady was his wife, perhaps, or his sister?"

The lodge-keeper laughed.

"You are wrong," she said. "Sir Arthur was married very young, and the young gentleman is his son and heir, Mr. Guy Tressilian. The young lady is Sir

Arthur's ward, and the servants up at the Court say that Mr. Guy and Miss Blanche are to be married."

"And so the handsome, fair young gentleman is Milord's son and heir," mused the Italian. "The only son, Signora?"

"Yes, the only son."

"Milord has lost a son lately?" suggested the Italian, pursuing his theory that Guy and Lowder were brothers.

The lodge-keeper looked surprised. She was a gossiping little woman, fond of a social chat, and even this seeming tramp was better company than none. She hastened to reply to his suggestion:

"Mr. Guy is the only son, and always has been. Sir Arthur had no other children."

Palestro's countenance fell. If his captive in Italy, in the hands of the Red Carvelli, were not the brother of his companion, who and what was he?

"Are you sure, Signora?" asked the ex-scrivener huskily. "Was there not a son who died abroad lately?"

"No; Mr. Guy is all the son Sir Arthur ever had. But Mr. Guy has been abroad for years, at the university and travelling. He was shipwrecked lately off Sicily, and came near drowning. Perhaps you've heard of his accident?"

"Yes," said Palestro, in a hoarse, low voice. "I have heard of it. Did—did the young Milord have a travelling companion?"

"Of course," responded the unsuspecting dame, who had heard Lowder's version of his shipwreck and its attendant circumstances from the servants of the Court. "It would not become the son and heir of Sir Arthur Tressilian to travel over that big, heathenish Continent alone, with no one to look after him when sick, nor to talk to when well. Mr. Guy disliked to have a valet, and he hired a travelling companion, a poor young gentleman,

who went with him everywhere, and was treated by him like a brother. Cressy, that's Miss Blanche's maid up at the Court, says that the young gentleman was hurt in the shipwreck I told you of, and is now in Sicily a downright idiot."

Palestro's sallow face became livid. Was Lowder's story true, after all? Was there no mystery? Had he deceived himself, and come to England upon a fool's errand? He thought it looked so.

"Could you tell me the name of the travelling companion, Signora?" he asked, in a half whisper.

"Yes; it's not a fine name: Lowder—Jasper Lowder."

A strange, sick sensation overcome the ex-scrivener. He leanded his head upon his hands. The story of the garrulous, simple lodge-keeper exactly confirmed that told by Lowder.

"But if it is all true," he thought, "Why did he look so guilty? Why did he stare at the idiot as if he were frightened at him? Why did he offer me so princely an annuity to keep him informed of the health of only a poor travelling companion? There is a mystery here, but what is it? I must know. I can never go back to Giuditta with this story. She would mock at me for my failure."

The fear of Giuditta, added to his own curiosity and greed, determined him to pursue his inquiries.

After some further reflection, he rose up, declaring himself refreshed, and inquired, as he put on his outer wrappings:

"Is there a servant wanted at the Court, Signora—a valet, or steward, or even a waiter?"

"I don't know I'm sure," said the lodge-keeper, upon whom the ex-scrivener had produced a favorable impression. "You could go up to the Court and inquire."

"I will do so," answered Palestro. "It will do no harm to try."

The woman gave him a few directions, and opened a door giving egress into the Tressilian grounds. Raising his hat to her, the Italian bade her good-morning, and struck out by a by-path running nearly parallel with the great avenue, from a view of which it was screened by shrubbery, for the Court.

He had arrived within a short distance of the grand old mansion, and was making his way around to a rear entrance, when he espied old Luke, the privileged old gardener, whose opinion, as will be remembered, was so unfavorable to Jasper Lowder, when the two met on the morning after Lowder's arrival at Tressilian Court.

Palestro went up to the octogenarian, who was busily engaged in potting plants with a pair of trembling hands, and who looked up at the Italian's approach, his wrinkled face wearing an expression of surprise.

Palestro raised his hat with his unfailing politeness, and inquired :

"Do you want an assistant gardener, sir?"

Old Luke's heart warmed to the sinister intruder at once. He had been for the larger share of his life head gardener at the Court, and his ideas were of a now forgotten school. He often sighed for the old times when trees were trimmed into fantastic shapes, the semblances of human beings or animals, and flower-gardens were cut into quaint beds, and sowed with old-time flowers, but the greatest grief of his life had come upon him when Sir Arthur had engaged a skilled modern gardener and given him the actual supervision of gardens and lawns, leaving to old Luke only the empty glories of a so-called superior rank. From the moment of the new gardener's coming, now some fif-

teen years, there had existed between the two the most intense rivalry. Each considered himself gardener-in-chief, and Sir Arthur was often called upon to settle the bickerings between the pair, and to decide which should and which should not be obeyed, when they had issued contradictory orders. Old Luke was, therefore, sensitive in regard to his rank, and Palestro's appeal to him, instead of to his rival, flattered him.

"I don't know," he observed, in a cracked voice, smiling benignantly upon the stranger. "You're a foreigner, eh? I don't think much of foreign gardens. Give me the good old English style; but I'm afraid we shall never have that back again. The world an't what it used to be. What can you do?"

He shook his head despondently, and his trowel fell from his nerveless hands.

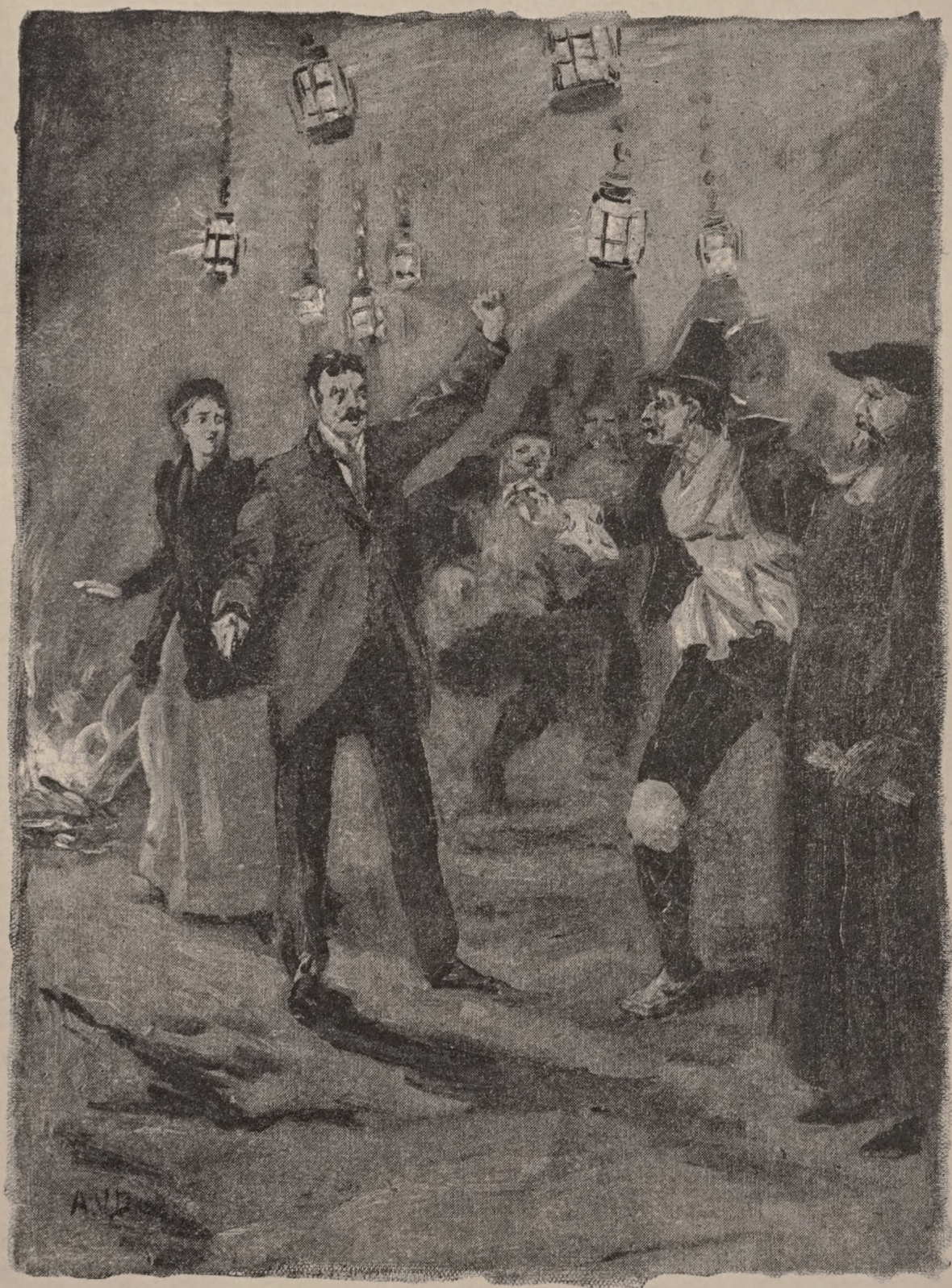
Palestro hastened to restore the implement to its proprietor and made answer:

"I can do anything you tell me, sir. I should obey your orders implicitly, sir, of course."

"I—I wish we had an opening for you," said old Luke, in his trembling tones. "But the truth is, we haven't. It's winter now, you see, and there's only the conservatories and green-houses to see to. No, I'm afraid there's no room for you."

"Perhaps I could get a place in the house?" said Palestro leaning carelessly against a marble urn, over whose sides a brown vine was trailing. "I have been valet, courier, everything. Perhaps the young Milord might want a valet."

"Perhaps," assented old Luke, in a growling voice. "I couldn't tell you as to that, my man. Mr. Guy hasn't spoken to me but once since he came home, and he used to think so much of old Luke, too! I always said that a furrin education and travel would spoil him. They'd



PLACED HIMSELF AT OLLA'S SIDE IN THE ATTITUDE OF A PROTECTOR.—See Chapter X.

spoil an angel. He an't the same lad since he came back."

A quick gleam shot from the ex-scrivener's eyes.

It was evident he took those last words literally.

"Not the same?" he exclaimed.

"No. He's as different as if he were another man! He's as strange and silent as if he had a secret on his mind. I used to fairly love the ground he walked on! and now, when he comes in the garden, it seems as though a serpent had crossed my path. He has no kind words for me, no smiles, no looks even. Oh, he's changed! Why, yesterday his old dog, that he used to love, and that used to love him, snapped at his legs, and he lifted his foot and kicked the poor animal and cursed him! I saw it all, and Mr. Guy scowled at me when he had finished. He'll make a fine Baronet!"

"He'd been away a good many years?"

"Five. But five years ought not to have made such a change in him. It reminds me of the stories I used to tell him of fairy changelings. It almost seems as though some wicked fairies—if one could only believe in such stuff—had changed our Master Guy for this fellow."

A sudden glow lit up Palestro's face. The old gardener's chance and meaningless words had aroused within the wily Italian a suspicion of the actual truth.

"At any rate," he thought exultantly, "I'll accuse the young Milord of being in another man's place. If it an't that, it's something else. There's a mystery here I'm bound to solve."

He set his teeth together firmly, and his restless black eyes emitted a shower of gleams, as he continued his reflections, and old Luke went on with his platitudes. After a little, however, Palestro broke away from the

garrulous old man and walked into the shadows of the park.

Here he remained some time thinking.

"I'll take the bull by the horns," he resolved, at last. "It is better to be too bold than not bold enough. I'll see him and accuse him of being an impostor. Shall I go to the house, or send him a note?"

He decided upon the latter. He had paper and pencil in his pocket, and proceeded to write a brief note to Lowder in Italian which might be translated as follows:

"MILORD SIR TRESOLINO: I am here, at Tressilian Court. I am in the edge of the park. Will you come out to me, or shall I come in to you?"

"JACOPO PALESTRO."

He sealed this threatening epistle with a wafer, addressed it plainly to "Mr. Guy Tressilian," and boldly made his way to the mansion and to a side door, sounded a knocker thrice heavily, and gave his missive into the hands of a servant with injunctions to deliver it immediately into the hands of "the Baronet's son."

He then returned to the edge of the park, and awaited impatiently the result of his peremptory summons to Jasper Lowder.

"He'd better come," he muttered, striding to and fro. "If he don't, I'll go up to the house and see the Baronet himself. We'll see what'll happen then!"



CHAPTER VI.

SCYLLA AND CHARYBDIS.

The anxiety of Olla Rymple in regard to poor Guy Tressilian—as he lay helplessly on the pile of blankets in the rock cell of the brigands' cavern, after the fateful visit of the experimenting outlaw Doctor—had time to deepen into a positive terror before the flush of returning consciousness struggled into those pale, wan cheeks, and before the broad breast began to rise and swell with the heart's renewed pulsations.

But the heavy eyelids trembled and lifted at last. The brilliant blue eyes sent restless glances of actual inquiry around the dismal cell, into the countenances of Mrs. Popley and her son, and settled at last upon Olla's bright young face.

The girl, kneeling beside her charge, holding his thin hand in her's, met his gaze, watching him in a breathless suspense.

Her soul thrilled as she saw that there was "speculation" in his eyes; that a keen spark of intelligence was kindled within him. The torpid intellect was rousing from its long sleep. The benumbed soul was awakening to light and life!

For a few moments an absolute silence reigned in the

dim cell. The rays of the lantern fell full upon Tressilian's ghastly face, framed in its locks of tawny hair, and upon the lithe, slight figure kneeling beside him, with dark, bright face and dusky eyes glowing like lamps. Olla held her breath in a terrible expectancy.

Presently Guy stirred on his pallet, raised his head upon his hand, leaning upon his elbow, and said, in the clear eager voice that had formerly distinguished him :

"What place is this? I—I don't remember—"

Olla's face was radiant. The tears sprang to her joy-lit eyes ; her happy mouth quivered.

"Oh, nurse Popley !" she ejaculated. "He is himself again ! God has restored to him his intellect !"

Sobbing and laughing in her joyful excitement, forgetful of her imprisonment and the dangers threatening her, Olla gave herself up to the supreme ecstasy of the moment.

At length Tressilian struggled to his feet, and looked around him in yet more earnest scrutiny. Then Olla also arose and approached him, laying her hand upon his arm.

"You wonder where you are, Mr. Lowder?" she said gently.

"Lowder?" repeated Guy, knitting his fair brows.

The girl's heart sank.

"Do you not remember that your name is Jasper Lowder?" she asked softly.

"Lowder?" again repeated Tressilian, brushing his forehead with one hand, as if to clear away a mist. "The name is familiar. I know it perfectly—but somehow, I can't quite remember. I feel stunned. My brain is not clear !"

"But try to remember," urged Olla, in anxious pleading. "It is your own name, Jasper."

Tressilian shook his handsome head with a puzzled smile.

"I—I don't think it's my name," he answered, "but I can't exactly remember. It will all come back to me soon, I dare say. Your face is very familiar. May I ask your name?"

"My name is Olla Rymple."

"A sweet name—Olla," mused Tressilian. "It seems to come naturally to my lips. Olla! Where are we?"

"We are in the mountain den of the famous, or infamous brigand, the Red Carvelli."

"In a brigand's cave?"

"Yes. You were wrecked on the Sicilian coast, Mr. Lowder, in a terrible storm—"

"A storm! I remember a storm."

"You were cast ashore, and your head was hurled violently against a rock. Your brain was injured and you have not been yourself since. I am taking you to England; or rather I started for England with you. This morning we left Naples in a carriage for Termoli. We were captured by brigands, and they have brought us to their retreat in the Monte del Matese. I suppose they intend to hold us for ransom."

Tressilian expressed his bewilderment and surprise, and made several inquiries, which Olla answered at length. A few minutes' conversation sufficed to give the Baronet's son a clear comprehension of his present condition and surroundings.

But no key could be found to unlock for him his sealed past. His memory still slept and refused to awaken. He accepted, with considerable uneasiness and expressed doubts, the name that had been put upon him, but again protested that his brain was not clear, and that he felt stunned.

It was remarkable that the cloud that had pressed upon his brain should have lifted as it had ; that his intellect should have resumed all its functions, save this one of remembering. He could think, reason, plan, but he could not recall his past.

"But you will remember," declared Olla, with bright hopefulness. "You shall have a first-class physician, if we ever get free again. As you are now so nearly restored, I am confident that under a good surgeon's care, you will entirely recover."

"I hope so," said Tressilian, with a troubled look in his blue and shining eyes. "It almost seems as if I could remember—and yet I cannot. I hardly think you have given me my real name," and he sighed heavily.

"We won't trouble ourselves about names," said Olla cheerfully. "We shall remember everything in good time. Just now, Jasper, we are in an unpleasant situation, and we must work our way out of it. We must keep up our strength, and to do that we must eat. There has been no way invented yet, I believe, for the happiest or most sorrowful people, to sustain life without food."

Popley placed a couple of chairs at the rude table. Olla took her place, and Tressilian seated himself opposite her. The meal was a homely one, of cold meats, bread, fruits and wine ; but the young pair assailed it with appetite, Popley and his mother eating their share in a distant corner.

The meal was scarcely concluded, when Olla heard footsteps in the rocky chamber without.

"The brigand chief is coming !" she exclaimed. "Jasper, he must not see the change in you. Please go into the adjoining room. Popley go with him. Mrs. Popley will remain with me."

Tressilian, without questioning, went into the inner chamber, the one designed for his use and that of Popley. His attendant followed him, nearly closing the door behind him.

The next moment the great key grated in the lock of Olla's cell, the massive door swung wide on its hinges, and the tall form of the brigand chief stalked into the dim chamber.

He paused near the threshold, sweeping a keen glance around the cell. He smiled, as he noticed how little remained of the liberal tray of food he had sent in to his prisoners, and said, as he closed the door and carelessly leaned his formidable figure against it :

"I am glad to see that your imprisonment has not affected your appetite, Signorina. Despite your courage of the morning, I expected to find you unable to eat, spiritless, crying—"

Olla's lips curled. A mocking light shone in her glowing eyes. She comprehended that her best method of dealing with her pitiless captor was to openly defy him. A trembling submission would only invite his tyranny.

"You flatter me," she remarked serenely. "If you came to witness an affecting scene, Signore, of tears and bewailings, I regret to disappoint you. But tears and pleadings and going without my dinner, when those things cannot benefit me, are not my forte. Won't you be seated ? I suppose it isn't necessary for me to apologize for the poverty of my surroundings ?"

The coarse, heavy face of the outlaw became transfused with a dull red glow. His black eyes blazed with admiration.

"Per Bacco !" he ejaculated. "You are but a mite, Signorina. I could pick you up under one arm, and

run off with you ; and yet you have the spirit of a giant. You dare to beard me—"

"And why shouldn't I?" interrupted the sweet mocking voice. "What are you? A robber—a thief—a stealer of pence and half-pence! Did you expect I would fall down in a swoon at the sound of your voice, or at sight of your face? You must have thought me as weak-minded as a child."

Carvelli scowled blackly, and bit his lips.

"You are frank, Signorina," he said sullenly. "I can see that you are not familiar with my reputation. Why, it isn't a month since I let loose an Inglese captive, minus his ears!"

Olla shuddered involuntarily, but the mocking light in her eyes did not quaver, nor the mocking smile on her lips fade.

"A manly deed!" she observed, with a little sneer. "I should think you would boast of it. It is, perhaps, what I should expect of the persecutor of women. Possibly your delicate little allusion really means that you have a fancy for my ears? You had better control your perverted tastes, Signore Brigand. I desire to keep them as a personal ornament a while longer."

"Well, you are a cool one!" commented Carvelli, admiringly. "You and I ought to be friends, Signorina. I admire courage above all things. Will you shake hands after the Inglese fashion?"

He held out his brawny, bony hand, red and coarse as the hand of a savage. Olla surveyed it an instant, put her own hands behind her, and shook her head, saying gravely :

"You must excuse me. I really can't gratify you. We will dispense with English fashions here. Let us come to business. Have you fixed the amount of my ransom?"

"I shall not admit you to ransom!" declared the brigand.

Olla was inwardly dismayed.

"You purpose, then, setting me free at once?" she inquired, with an affectation of bravado.

"Not at all, Signorina. You mistake my character and intentions. Permit me to talk plainly to you. When I captured you, I had the intention of letting you go again, on the payment of a heavy ransom. But your beauty and spirit have captivated your captor. I am your prisoner even more than you are mine. I love you, Signorina. I am going to marry you!"

Olla arched her pretty brows.

"Don't you think you are making a little too sure?" she suggested. "In the country I came from it is customary to let a lady have a voice also in the matter."

The outlaw frowned.

"The Red Carvelli never asks for that he has power to take," he said grimly. "Yet, if I could, I would woo you as your Inglese woo, with sweet words and pleadings. But I have no temper for that sort of business. You know you are beautiful as well as I know it, and it is only a waste of breath to dilate upon the glory of your features. You suit me. Your disposition and mine are alike fierce—"

Olla made a little grimace.

"You are a fine Inglesina: I am an Italian outlaw," pursued Carvelli; "but we should be happy together. You should be an outlaw queen. The band should respect your slightest word. You should have silks and jewels, and whatever trumpery women like. You should make trips to the big cities now and then, and I would always treat you kindly."

"Humph!" said Olla. "A fine prospect—for you! I am, however, out of consideration to myself, compelled

to decline the position you offer me as 'outlaw queen.'"

Carvelli paid no heed to this polite renunciation of himself, but exclaimed grimly :

"My mind is made up, Signorina. You are completely in my power. But I will consider your scruples, your delicacy. I will make you my honorable wife. I know of a worthy priest in a village not many miles distant. I am now going to send men to capture him. This evening we shall have a wedding festival, and you shall be the bride. Make ready for the ceremony. I wish you to look your best. The men are already preparing the wedding feast."

"But suppose I hold out against this marriage?" demanded Olla, appalled at the prospect before her.

"You cannot," said the brigand, yet more grimly. "You shall become my wife whether you will or no. Force is stronger than persuasion. You will marry me," he added hissing, "or you will see your three friends die before your face this very night. Choose! I will come for your decision when the priest arrives."

He went out abruptly, and secured the door.

CHAPTER VII.

A CRISIS IN OLLA'S MISFORTUNES.

For some hours, Olla and her friends were left to themselves in their dimly lighted cells in the brigand's mountain retreat. The Popleys employed the time in lamentations over the fate which threatened their beautiful young mistress. Guy Tressilian sat apart, evidently comprehending Olla's peril, his handsome

face grave and sad to sternness. And Olla herself felt all her courage desert her, as she considered the prospect before her.

"I am no heroine after all, I am afraid," she said sorrowfully, as she restlessly paced the rocky floor. "Of course I don't mean that I am in the mood to lie down and be trampled upon. Meekness is not my forte. Nor resignation either. If I have to give into superior force, I shall do so under protest, with drums beating and banners flying, so to speak."

"Then you've made up your mind to marry that terrible brigand, Miss Olla?" sighed Mrs. Popley.

"No, I haven't," declared Olla, with reviving decision. "I haven't made up my mind to anything yet. At the moment I spoke I realized my own helplessness and this Carvelli's power, and I felt all my courage ooze out at the tips of my fingers. I forgot that, though he has all the power on his side, I have the right on mine. Things have come to a desperate pass with me, dear old nurse, but I think," she added gently, and with a reverent glance upward, "I can trust in Providence still."

"But I'm afraid that won't help us," moaned poor Mrs. Popley, utterly despairing. "If I could only suffer for you, my dear lamb! If this red brigand would only take me in your stead."

A smile flickered for an instant over the girl's red lips, but it faded and was succeeded by a sorrowful quivering.

"Don't grieve for me, nurse Popley," she said tenderly. "I am not Carvelli's wife yet. And though he may frighten some priest into uttering a mockery of marriage over us, I never shall be his wife. I'll die first!"

Mrs. Popley looked at her resolute young mistress

with an admiring awe. The girl's eyes flashed, the scarlet fluttered in her cheeks, and her face glowed with an expression of determination and defiance.

Guy Tressilian looked at Olla also with a keen admiration, and he felt his heart stir strangely within him. He had been pondering deeply upon his own condition, trying to tear aside the veil that shrouded from him his past, but he lost all thought of himself now in his contemplation of Olla.

"She looks like a young goddess," he said to himself. "She is a very spirit of radiance. I would die for her!"

His blue eyes shone like stars, revealing by their fires the ardor of his thoughts.

About nightfall, although there was nothing to mark the difference between day and night in that dreary dungeon, the door of Olla's cell was unlocked, and the brigand "Doctor" again made his appearance, bearing a tray of food.

He closed the door, set down his tray, and fixed his gaze upon Tressilian, who regarded him with a bright and inquiring glance.

"He's alive yet, I see," said the Doctor, with a sigh of relief. "I half expected to find him dead. How is he?"

"Better—much better," said Olla. "He is almost well. He talks as rationally as I do."

"I feel stunned yet!" declared Tressilian. "It seems as if I had had a blow on my head from a club. Everything seems to me hazy and unreal. And the worst of it is, I can't remember;" and he put his hand to his head, smoothing his brows.

"If you are all right, excepting a lack of memory, you'll do!" exclaimed the doctor, a gratified smile curving his lips. "I had a real genius for surgery. If I had kept on, and led a humdrum life of respectability, I would have been the first surgeon in Italy."

"Do you consider that this outlaw existence recompenses you for the loss of social position and honors?" inquired Olla gravely. "Are you willing to bury your talents in a robbers' cave, to be hunted like a wild beast, and die at last an ignominious death, when your career might be so different?"

The Doctor colored, and muttered something about the joys of "a free, wild life." Then he turned hastily again to Tressilian, as if anxious to dismiss the idea Olla had called up.

"If you were to trust yourself again to me," he said, "I think I could finish that little operation in good style. I'd like to show you, Signorina, that I have talents of account. That Dr. Spezzo has not half the daring, courage and skill I should have developed. He did not like to undertake the case of the young Inglese. See what I have done. Will you allow me to try again?"

Tressilian shook his head. Evidently he considered what the Doctor had already accomplished as a lucky accident, rather than the result of a skillful operation. Perhaps he fancied the outlaw too eager and reckless to be intrusted with so delicate a task. At any rate, he declined the proffered assistance.

"I will see a Paris doctor," he said thoughtfully.

"If you ever see Paris!" returned the Doctor smiling. "I believe the Captain don't intend to lose sight of you. He thinks he's got a prize this time, as he has!" and he bowed gallantly at the girl captive.

"I would like to ask you a few questions," said Olla, looking at the outlaw sharply. "It was evident that your captain expected us at the crossing of the ravine this morning. He was lying in wait for our very party. How was that? Had he information of our coming?"

The Doctor hesitated. Olla accepted his silence as an affirmative answer.

"I suppose he has spies in Naples," she said carelessly. "No doubt that Lipari, our driver, was in Carvelli's pay. It struck me that Carvelli seemed to expect to see just us, and no other travellers. I should like to ask you another question. Is the Signora Palestro, the landlady of the Vesuvius Inn, an acquaintance of your captain's?"

The Doctor laughed.

"She had ought to be," he answered. "She is his sister. There, I have talked too much. But every one in Naples knows that the pretty landlady of the Vesuvius Inn is the sister of the Red Carvelli."

This reply let a flood of light into the mind of Olla. She had been puzzling herself with various surmises in regard to her capture, but it was now plain to her that she had been betrayed into the brigand's hands by one of her own sex—namely, the buxom, red-cheeked mistress of the Vesuvius Inn.

"What is all that noise in the outer cavern?" she asked, after a pause.

"The men are getting ready for the evening's festivities, Miladi," replied the Doctor. "The messengers have not yet come with the priest, but they must soon be here. The Captain will come for you in good time."

With this he withdrew.

Again the hours wore on. Olla wound her watch, and paced her floor with light and restless tread. Tressilian, utterly wearied and worn, retired to his couch in the adjoining cell. Popley went with him, and both were presently asleep. Mrs. Popley, in obedience to Olla's desire, lay down upon the pile of blankets and sobbed herself into uneasy slumbers. But Olla, sleepless and anxious, moved softly to and fro, her face pale

and sorrowing, her dusky eyes full of a rebellious questioning.

The night passed, and no summons came to the outer cavern. The sounds of life and festivity died out of the entire underground abode. Evidently some hitch had occurred in Carvelli's plans, and the prospective wedding was deferred.

Toward morning, Olla took up her own pile of blankets and lodged it against the door in a manner to obstruct the entrance of any person. Then, having said her prayers, she lay down and went to sleep.

It was about nine o'clock when she awakened, but no light from the day without could of course penetrate into that subterranean cell. Mrs. Popley was astir, and movements were heard in the adjoining chamber.

Olla arose, and made her toilet as best she could with the scanty accommodations at her command. The light was burning low in the lantern, and the air was chilly and damp. The girl shivered.

"This won't be good for your rheumatism, Mrs. Popley," she said, trying to speak gayly. "I have read about caves in stories, and I always thought them a romantic sort of abode. But experience dispels the romance. What is a cave but a damp, chilly hole in the rock or earth? I feel as if I had been buried in this vault for ages. Oh, if I could only get out into the sunshine and fresh air again!"

She brushed out her crisp jetty locks, smoothing them as well as she was able away from her small dark face, and then resumed her weary walking to and fro.

A little later the Doctor brought in breakfast and a fresh lantern.

Olla inquired in a mocking voice what had interrupted the course of the preceding evening's festivities.

"The men could not find the priest," was the response.

"He had gone to visit a sick parishoner. The men will go for him again to-night. We are obliged to lie low by day, for a friend has sent us word from Naples that the troops are actually going to make a search for us. Let them search. They can never find us."

The Doctor did not linger as on his previous visits, but retired, securing the door. He came but once again during the day, and then his visit was also brief.

The day passed. The evening was wearing on, when a loud uproar in the great outer cavern testified that an event of interest was occurring there.

A little later, the Red Carvelli, made his appearance in the cell of his captives.

He had dressed himself with scrupulous care. His garments were of Genoa velvet. In his ruffled shirt front a big diamond blazed, and another fine brilliant secured his long straight plume to his sugar-loaf hat.

"The priest has come, Signorina," he said, bowing. "He understands what is required of him. The men are making ready our bridal supper. All that is wanting is the bride."

"A serious want!" observed Olla.

"I am aware," said Carvelli, "that her bridal is the most important feature in a woman's life. If ever she wants to make a display, she does then. We cannot offer you a very fashionable audience, Signorina, to comment upon your beauty or splendors, but the men are inclined to be appreciative. And so, to bear your part to the general satisfaction, it would be well for you to wear bridal finery. Your woman there can robe you, and I will furnish the materials."

He clapped his hands, and two of his followers entered, bearing between them a chest.

This receptacle on being opened was found to be filled with a great supply of finery. The men tossed it

out upon the floor as if it had been rubbish, one of them holding a lantern so that its rays fell full upon gleaming silks, delicate tulles and laces, and other fabrics for women's dress.

"You can get a veil out of that," said Carvelli. "And that is all that's really needed besides your ordinary apparel. Brides always wear veils."

"Perhaps I shall when I become a bride," said Olla. "As I have no expectation of becoming one at present, I shall not put one on. You had better carry your trumpery out, Signore Robber."

Carvelli's face flushed with anger.

"If you don't want a veil, you needn't have it," he exclaimed, kicking the unlucky finery into a corner. "Everything is ready, and the priest is waiting. You must come."

He held out his hand to her.

Olla quietly buttoned her little seal sacque, perched her hat upon her head, and motioned Tressilian and Popley to precede her. Then she took Mrs. Popley's arm, and the party made its way into the outer cavern.

It was indeed a festal scene that greeted them. The rude, rough walls of the cavern were hung with green boughs, from whose shadows a hundred lanterns glowed like fiery eyes. A great fire was roaring and blazing at the side of the chamber.

In the midst of the long, irregular room was a rude freshly made table, covered with clean linen. Upon this was spread a plentiful feast of meats, including roasted birds of various sorts, fancy breads recently stolen from some village bake-shop, dishes of fruits—olives, grapes and confitures—and tankards and bottles of red and white wines of Italy's most famous brands.

Several tall lamps were interspersed among the

heaped-up dishes, displaying the table to the best advantage.

Along the walls, like so many shadows, were ranged the outlaws, all in their best attire, all silent and expectant.

At one end of the rocky chamber was a raised dais, covered with carpeting. Here two chairs were placed side by side, like twin thrones.

The Red Carvelli mounted this dais, half leading, half dragging Olla after him.

Clutching her arm tightly in his he compelled her to face the outlaw assemblage.

But it was no gentle or resigned look Olla bestowed upon the outlaw band. Her dusky eyes were full of mutiny, and flashed like suns ; her face glowed with a mocking defiance, and her sweet, red mouth was curved in a scornful, distainful expression. Her small noble head, enwreathed with jetty tresses, was poised haughtily upon her slender neck, and her whole mien expressed a bitter scorn and defiance better than words could have done.

One of the outlaws set up a cheering, in which his companions joined heartily.

When silence had been restored, Carvelli swept a swift glance around him.

Mrs. Popley had fallen on her knees at the foot of the dais, weeping and moaning. Jim Popley, muttering British oaths between his clenched teeth, looked ready to do battle with the whole robber band, at a word from his young mistress.

Guy Tressilian stood apart, pale as death, his blue eyes glowing, his form drawn up to its utmost height. His hands were clenched, his teeth set firmly. It was plain that he understood what was going on around

him. It was plain also, that he felt his own helplessness with an utter despair.

The Red Carvelli did not notice that the fair, handsome face of the young Englishman was instinct with intelligence. He did not see that any change had come to him, whom he deemed an idiot. Simply marking Tressilian's presence, he continued his scrutiny of the cavern.

"Where is the priest?" he asked at last, his hoarse voice ringing through the great vault.

A dozen voices answered him, and then uprose from a gloomy niche in a distant corner the figure of a priest.

An outlaw seized an arm of the priest and hurried him toward the dais, at the foot of which they halted, the brigand then abandoning the new prisoner.

The priest thus left standing was seen to be a tall, robust, elderly man, tonsured and robed as befitted his calling. He had been seized by the messengers of the Red Carvelli on his way home from the death-bed of one of his parishioners. The brigand chief had already informed him what was expected of him, but it was plain he did not like his task.

Olla regarded him earnestly.

He had by no means a handsome face, but it was simple, honest and unworldly. Olla saw at a glance that he pitied her, and was friendly to her, while he regarded her captors with loathing.

"You may proceed with the ceremony, holy padre," said Carvelli, in a sneering voice. "I haven't much fancy for people of your cloth, but the young Inglesina here, like all women, has a weakness for the clergy. Marry us in your best style, and, as you were brought here blindfold, you shall be taken away again with your pockets lined with gold."

The priest turned his glances upon Olla.

"Daughter," he said, in a mild, persuasive voice, "am I to understand that you choose to make the best of your miserable circumstances, and that you consent to marry this man, Guiseppe Carvelli?"

"No—no!" cried Olla in a passionate voice. "I am only a helpless prisoner, but I will not marry him. Not even to save my life would I wed him! Holy father, I am not of your people, nor of your religion, but, in the name of the God we both worship, I beseech you to befriend me!"

"Ah, I am as helpless as yourself," said the priest compassionately. "I am a prisoner also. But I say to you, Guiseppe Carvelli," he added sternly, "that I refuse to obey your will. I will not offend the God I serve by invoking His blessing upon a union between innocence like this girl's and guilt like yours!"

"What! You will not marry us?"

"I will not!"

A gleam like that of lightning shot from the eyes of the Red Carvelli. The veins knotted in his forehead.

"You defy me?" he said hoarsely.

"No," said the priest, "I do not defy you. But I am the servant of God, and I cannot assist at a marriage like this. I cannot tie an unwilling woman to any man."

The brigand chief scowled blackly.

"Ah, you have scruples!" he sneered. "Well, so be it. But the bride shall consent. You don't know me yet. Why, I have done deeds that would make your blood run cold! Ho, there! Three of you fellows step this way."

Three of the biggest and burliest of the outlaws, armed to the teeth, came to the foot of the dais.

"Seize the three Inglese!" thundered the Red Carvelli.

In a moment Mrs. Popley, her son and Guy Tressilian were in the firm grasp of the brigand's followers.

"You see?" ejaculated the Red Carvelli, looking upon Olla with a face like a demon's. "You must realize how completely you and your friends are in my power. Now I have set my heart upon a marriage like those of all the world. I am going to ask you once more if you will be my wife. But first you shall see what depends upon your answer."

He turned toward the men who held the prisoners.

"Draw your daggers!" he commanded.

The men obeyed, and the steel of their poinards glittered in the lamplight.

"Let not the idiot be harmed!" cried the Red Carvelli. "He is other game than mine. I am but holding him in safety for another. But at my word of command, plunge your daggers to the hilt in the breast of the Inglese serving-man and serving-woman," and he waved his hand at the Popleys. "Remember!"

The two outlaws nodded assent.

Again the terrible Red Carvelli fixed his gleaming eyes upon the appalled girl captive.

"You hear?" he demanded. "I could make you my wife without all these formalities, but I choose to carry out what I have begun. Now, understand, Miladi. At my word of command, my men yonder will stretch your two servants dead at your feet. And I shall speak that word if you again refuse to marry me. Their life and death are in your hands. Say Yes, and they live. Say No, and they die. And in any case you are mine. Now, for the last time, I ask you to marry me. What do you answer? Speak!"



CHAPTER VIII.

PALESTRO AND LOWDER.

While Fate was thus playing with the fortunes of the Baronet's son, how fared it with the pretender?

The events to which we have before called the attention of the reader, namely, the arrival of Palestro in England, and his visit to Tressilian Court in the trail of Jasper Lowder, had transpired some five days later than the tragic scene recorded in the preceding chapter.

After sending his hastily written letter to Lowder by the hands of a servant, and retiring into the edge of the park, as described, Jacopo Palestro awaited the coming of the usurper with feelings of unalloyed exultation.

He believed that he had solved the mystery of Lowder's conduct : that he held in his keeping a momentous secret ; and that a grand vista of wealth was opening before him.

While he stood in the shadows of the park, almost intoxicated with joy at the good fortune which had placed in his shrewd keeping a clew to the truth of Lowder's identity, Lowder himself was in the grand drawing-room of the Court, as peaceful and happy as if no peril were yawning before him.

On coming in from his drive to Gloucester, Lowder had removed his greatcoat in the hall, and had saun-

tered into the drawing-room. Sir Arthur Tressilian followed him, while Blanche ran up to her own room to rid herself of her outer wrappings.

Lowder walked to the fire, and leaned carelessly against the mantel-piece. Sir Arthur approached a window looking toward the park. The Baronet's handsome face was very grave, as it always was now, but his brown eyes beamed with a kindly expression, and a cheerful smile was on his lips.

"The winter is already slipping away, Guy," he remarked. "The sixth of February will soon be here. Blanche will have to send some of her orders up to town, and even go to town herself before the marriage. Our little girl must have a brilliant wedding. One of my errands to-day was to send to London your mother's diamonds to be reset. Blanche must wear them on her bridal day."

"Of course," assented Lowder indolently.

"It was your mother's wish that her son's bride should wear the Tressilian jewels," continued Sir Arthur, a weary tone in his voice. "I call them the Tressilian diamonds, but in fact they are not. They came from your mother's family. There is a tiara, necklace, bracelets, brooch, ear-drops— Ah! what strange fellow is that in the edge of the park? He has the look of a foreigner. He has drawn back now. He seems to be gone."

"It was doubtless one of the park laborers," replied Lowder indifferently. "I noticed they were at work this morning, carrying away the broken twigs and dead leaves."

At this juncture Blanche entered, and both men had eyes and ears only for her.

She was looking very lovely in her violet dress, and with violet ribbons in her golden hair. Her face was

arch and bright and sweet, but Sir Arthur fancied that there lurked a shadow in the deep gray eyes, and that there was a wistful expression under all the gayety of her face. Had she some secret wish ungratified? he asked himself. Was she not as contented and happy as she seemed?

Sir Arthur came forward and placed a chair for her with his old-fashioned courtesy. Lowder did not stir from his lounging attitude, but his eyes expressed his admiration of his young betrothed.

"Well," Lowder said lazily, "the business of getting ready to be married is already inaugurated. We shall have busy times during the next few weeks. My father says we shall have to escort you up to London, you extravagant little Blanche, for Gloucester will not contain things fine enough for you."

Blanche laughed merrily.

"It is the fashion to fit out a bride as if she were going to the South Seas, where shops are unknown," she observed, "and of course I must do as others do. I rather like the excitement of shopping, and so on. People, as a general thing, expect to be married but once and they like to make the most of that single occasion."

"And you are very happy in the prospect of marrying, are you not, Blanche?" asked Sir Arthur tenderly.

The girl started, and then assented with a swift blush. The next instant the blush faded, leaving her pale, and the wistful, unsatisfied look crept into her grey eyes. As if unable to bear the Baronet's loving scrutiny, she averted her face.

"She loves him," thought the Baronet, "with all a young girl's fervor. But there is something lacking. She is not quite contented. What is it gives that wistful look to her face?"

He was pondering the question when the door opened, and a servant entered, bearing a note on a salver.

"For Mr. Guy," he said, approaching Lowder. "It was left by a foreign-looking person."

Lowder took up the missive, dismissing the servant. He opened the note carelessly, a smile on his lips.

"A begging letter, no doubt," he said, meeting Sir Arthur's glance. "I've had several already since the papers have chronicled my return."

He glanced at the brief and peremptory note written by Palestro. At sight of the name appended to it, he seemed turned to stone. His face grew ghastly in its whiteness; his eyes started in a wild amazement; his mouth was drawn by hard, tense lines; and his hands trembled until the paper they held rattled. It was as if, according to the old fable, he had looked upon the Gorgon's head.

Sir Arthur regarded him in astonishment.

"Have you bad news, Guy?" he asked.

Lowder started as from a trance. He tried to laugh, but could only call to his white lips a faint and sickly smile.

"N-no; it's not bad news," he muttered, in a harsh, constrained voice. "It is only an impudent, begging letter, as I supposed."

He crumpled the letter in his hands savagely, and tossed it upon the grate of live coals.

Sir Arthur looked at him with concern.

"My boy," he said kindly, "no ordinary begging letter could alarm you so. What is the matter?"

"I tell you—nothing!" cried Lowder fiercely. "I have simply an attack of vertigo. I am subject to it since my accident. The fresh air will cure me," he added, more mildly. "I am going out to try it."

He took up a small iron poker and thrust his crum-

pled letter into the very depth of the bed of coals. He watched the paper blaze and burn to a mere brown and fluttering skeleton, and then he strode from the room.

Blanche, who had witnessed the scene in a deep amazement, also withdrew by another door, returning to her room.

Lowder put on his hat and greatcoat hurriedly, and hastened out of the house. Sir Arthur, standing at the drawing-room window, saw his supposed son make straight for the park, and saw also the figure of Palestro start forth from the shadows to meet him.

The Baronet knew then that the note had been a summons. He knew, what he had before vaguely suspected, that there was a mystery in the life of this man who called him father, and who had won the love of innocent Blanche.

But what, he asked himself, was this mystery?

While he was debating the question so painful to him Lowder had entered the park, into which Palestro had again retreated. He advanced a few paces along the wide gravelled walk, and found himself face to face with the ex-scrivener of Palermo.

Palestro held out his hand, with a smirking visage.

"I beg your pardon for coming, Milord Sir Tressolino," he said glibly. "But it was necessary that I should see you immediately—"

"What! Has he—the idiot escaped?"

"No, Milord. He is quite safe—"

"Then why are you here?"

"I came to see you on account of the poor Signore, Milord—"

"He—he has then recovered his senses?"

"No, Milord. He is more an idiot than ever. He can never be helped, the good Doctor Spezzo says."

Lowder's face had been livid. His eyes of twice

their natural size, burned with unholy fires. Now his face changed a little in its color, and he asked in a different voice :

“ How did you find me ? ”

“ I arrived in Gloucester this morning, and inquired for one Sir Tresolino. No one could inform me. I went to the post-office. The clerk could not tell me. I asked for one John Harroville. The clerk could not tell me of him. So I muffled myself and waited. You came in, as I expected, my letter being overdue. I followed you down the street to your carriage. I trotted after your carriage to this place. And here I am.”

“ And why have you come all the way to England to tell me that that idiot is well and safe ? ” demanded Lowder.

“ There have been changes since you were in Sicily, Signore,” said Palestro, ignoring the question for the present. “ The husband of my kinswoman, Signor Vicini, is dead. Teresa has gone home to Catania, to her own people. And the Inglese—the idiot—has left Italy.”

“ Left Italy ! Great Heaven ! ”

“ I have left Italy also,” said Palestro composedly. “ I have married a buxom maiden, the keeper of an inn near Naples. The Vesuvius Inn, Signore. You may have heard of it, and of its pretty proprietor, Giuditta Carvelli. She is a sister of the Red Carvelli, the famous brigand ! ”

“ What is all this to me ? I would know of *him* ! ”

“ I'm coming to him. He made a friend in Sicily, a young Inglesa. A girl so lovely, Signore, that one might worship her. She had a tender heart, and last week ran away from her guardian at Palermo, or thereabouts, and took with her the imbecile Inglese. She

started for England with him. She left Sicily in a felucca, with two servants and the imbecile—"

Lowder interrupted him by a cry of terror.

"They are on their way here?" he gasped.

"They came to Naples," said Palestro calmly. "They put up at the Vesuvius Inn. The next morning Giuditta—she is a wily one, is Giuditta—told the young Inglesa that she was pursued by her guardian, and persuaded her to go to Termoli, to take the other line. The young lady agreed. She set out with her party for Termoli, as she supposed. About midway the distance her carriage was attacked by brigands, and the whole party was captured. That night they reposed in the mountain retreat of the Red Carvelli. They are there still."

Lowder wiped the perspiration from his brows.

"This Red Carvelli is your brother-in-law?" he said.

"Yes. He will do as I say. If I say let the imbecile Inglese go, he will obey. If I say kill him, he will obey!"

Lowder's eyes gleamed with the spirit of murder for a single instant. The next he cast the devilish thought from him as if it had been a poisonous adder. Bad as he was, he could not conspire in cold blood to murder Guy Tressilian, who had been his truest friend.

"He is safe in this brigand's retreat?" he asked.

"Safer than in Sicily."

"Who is this English girl who befriends him?"

"She is a Signorina Reemple."

"Reemple? Rymple, perhaps?"

Palestro assented.

"And the imbecile could live years in the brigand's mountain retreat and remain undiscovered?"

"He could be no safer, no more securely hidden from prying eyes, in a tiger's den."

Lowder's face lit up with a gloating expression.

"It is well," he said. "But why did you not write this? Why did you come to England?"

Palestro's eyes gleamed with cunning.

"I will be frank with you, Signore," he answered. "I had formed a theory that you and this imbecile were brothers, and that he was the elder and heir. I thought you were glad to have him out of your way. I came to England to see if my theory were true."

"Well?" said Lowder sharply.

"I found myself mistaken. I have talked with your lodge-keeper and your old gardener. I find that the story you told was true. I find that Mr. Guy Tresolino went abroad five years since; that he had no brother; that he had a travelling companion named Jasper Lowder, and that the travelling companion is now in Sicily, an imbecile. The gardener told me all this."

"You knew it before. Now that your fine theory is dispelled, you must return at once to Italy and look after Lowder. I won't mind giving you an extra fifty pounds—"

"One moment," interrupted the scheming innkeeper, his small eyes gleaming. "The gruff old gardener said that 'Master Guy' was changed since he went away—that he was not the same man. I knew, from the moment I looked in upon you through the window of the Vicini cottage, as you regarded the face of your stricken comrade, that there was some awful mystery about you two. And I have discovered that mystery," he cried, coming to the point of all his suspicions, for as yet they were nothing more. "That imbecile at Naples is the true Guy Tressilian. And you—false friend, false servant—are the travelling companion, Jasper Lowder!"

Lowder sprang back with a galvanic start.

Guilt showed in his eyes, in his features. He actually

cowered before his accuser, horror expressed in every line of his ghastly face.

"This—this is preposterous!" he stammered, with chattering teeth.

"Sir Arthur would think the question worth investigating."

There was a brief silence between the pair. Lowder felt himself unmasked, and at the mercy of his shrewd opponent. He tried to recover his usual audacity, but in vain.

At last he said, in a low voice :

"How much money do you want?"

Palestro considered.

"Let me see," he said. "You have a splendid home, a lovely bride in prospect, and she is an heiress. You will be a Milord some day. You shall give me two thousand pounds to-morrow night. For that sum now, and as much more when you are Milord, I will promise by the Holy Maria and all the saints to keep your secret inviolate."

"Why not ask me for the crown jewels? Two thousand pounds! It is impossible!"

"You must get it, no matter how. I shall be at this spot to-morrow night at ten o'clock. You must bring to me the two thousand pounds, or I will betray all to Sir Arthur! Mind, no treachery. If anything happens to me, Giuditta will see Sir Arthur and tell him all! You had better get me the money. Otherwise you are ruined. If you are not here before that hour, I shall see Sir Arthur at eleven!"

Leaving these words ringing in Lowder's ears, Palestro glided away into the deeper shadows of the park.

"Two thousand pounds!" ejaculated the desperate usurper. "I cannot get one-tenth of that sum. And if I fail, I am lost! What shall I do?"



CHAPTER IX.

ANOTHER DOWNWARD STEP.

For some minutes after the abrupt withdrawal of Jacopo Palestro from his presence in the dim Park of Tressilian Court, Jasper Lowder stood like a statue, paralyzed with horror and despair.

Absolute ruin yawned before him. He knew that the decision of Palestro was like the fiat of Fate—irrevocable. He knew that any appeals to his mercy or forbearance would be useless. He knew that unless he paid into the hands of the ex-scrivener, at the time the latter had appointed, the sum Palestro had demanded, he would be betrayed to Sir Arthur and to Blanche, and be overwhelmed with the ruin he so richly merited.

“What am I to do?” he asked himself, in a frenzy. “Palestro would be glad to sell out his secret to Sir Arthur. Curse the fellow! He is sharper than I thought. How could he trace out a secret I had so carefully hidden? And how am I to obtain two thousand pounds by to-morrow night? It is impossible.”

A cold sweat broke out on his forehead. The fever raging within him forced him to move back and forth in the gloomy path, under the arching trees, like an uneasy shadow. What thoughts came to him in that

miserable hour, God and himself only knew. But the spirit of murder glared from his wild, bloodshot eyes, from his drawn and ghastly face, and lurked about the corners of his savage mouth. Had Palestro returned to him at that moment, it would have gone hard with the Italian. But he did not return, and the impostor kept up his weary walk, and raged to and fro with the fury of a demon seething in his soul.

The hour passed. Gradually a calmness born of utter desperation took possession of him.

"The game is not yet finished," he said to himself. "I have a few hours yet. I must make a move that will save me ! but if I fail in that, I must fly to the north and to Hester. She will always take me in. Curse that Palestro a million times ! I should be tempted to destroy him, had he not guarded against my violence by making such an act the signal for my own destruction. I must pay him the sum he demands. I must retain my position. But where am I to get the two thousand pounds ?"

He thought of various impossible plans of raising money. He could not borrow a sum so large on such short notice, and without declaring what he wanted of it. He could not ask Sir Arthur for it. He could not apply to a professional money-lender at Gloucester, with the entire certainty of keeping the transaction secret. He could not effect a mortgage upon Guy Tressilian's double farm of Gildethorpe without the fact coming to the knowledge of the Baronet. The usurper felt that he was driven to stand at bay.

The British youth of "expectations" is familiar with many ways of procuring money without earning it, when his regular allowances are found inadequate to his fancied wants. The practice of calculating upon the decease of parents and guardians, and "borrowing" money, at exorbitant rates of interest on *post-obits*, was

perfectly familiar in theory to Jasper Lowder. He gave it his consideration now, but presently rejected the idea as not feasible.

What money-lender would advance so large a sum as two thousand pounds, to be repaid when Lowder should come into possession of Tressilian Court, when a life like Sir Arthur's, hale, vigorous, athletic, and barely middle-aged, stood between the pretended heir and the Tressilian wealth?

For hours Lowder remained in the park, battling with this crisis of his fortunes. The afternoon was nearly spent before he had calmed himself sufficiently to return to the Court.

Sir Arthur and Blanche were seated in the great bay-window of the drawing-room as the usurper crossed the terrace. He lifted his hat to them in an affectation of gayety, and walked on with a dragging step and slouching gait, entering the grand old mansion. He removed his hat and greatcoat in the hall, hanging them upon the branching antlers serving as hat-rack, hesitated a moment, with his face toward the drawing-room door, and then slowly and wearily ascended to his own chamber. He did not feel able yet to meet the keen, inquiring gaze of the Baronet, or the probable merry questioning of Blanche.

He remained in his own room until he heard the ringing of the dinner-bell. Then he emerged, rather pale and careworn, it is true, but elegantly dressed and perfumed, and made his way to the dining-room.

The short December day had ended more than an hour since. The chandeliers in the great dining-room were all aglow. The long crimson curtains were gathered in folds over the windows and the little garden door. A fire was burning redly in the grate. The oval table, draped with finest damask, glittered and

sparkled with its service of silver and gold, porcelain and crystal. All was warmth, light and brightness.

Sir Arthur and Blanche were already in the room, and both seemed rather grave and pre-occupied. The Baronet, handsomely attired, looked more than ever grand and noble by contrast with the foppish and rather effeminate Lowder. Blanche marked her guardian's noble appearance, with a secret thrill of dissatisfaction that his supposed son did not more resemble him.

"Sir Arthur is a thousand times handsomer than Guy," she thought. "And somehow, he even looks fresher and younger at times. If he were only twenty years younger than he is—"

She did not finish the thought save by a vivid blush which Sir Arthur and Lowder both thought called up by the admiring glance of the latter.

Blanche had never looked more lovely than on this evening, in her violet velvet dress, with violet ribbons filleting her pale golden hair, with the faint flush, like the delicate tinting inside a sea-shell, coming and going in her clear cheeks, and with great gray eyes, lustrous and tender, yet with that wistful sadness which Sir Arthur had remarked, and which he failed to comprehend, in their lucid depths.

The trio took their seats at the table. Purmton, the worthy old butler, kept a watchful supervision over the two waiters, and the meal progressed almost in silence.

It was not until the wine and dessert were brought on, and the servants, including Purmton, had retired, that Sir Arthur's gravity seemed to relax. Then, as if desiring to brighten the social atmosphere, he said, with a smile :

"You look sober, Guy. Even Blanche's presence has not power to dispel the cloud on your face. I fancy

you are not yourself since the receipt of that begging letter this afternoon, and since your interview with that odd little foreigner."

Lowder had fancied himself prepared for any allusions to Palestro's letter, and his agitation upon receiving it, but he now started involuntarily.

Sir Arthur marked the gray shadow creeping over the usurper's fair face, and saw that Lowder was more than startled—that he was alarmed.

"You—you saw the fellow?" stammered Lowder, in a hoarse, strange voice.

"I caught a glimpse of him as he stepped out of the shadow of the park as you approached," responded Sir Arthur, now fully convinced that there was some mystery in the past of his supposed son. "Was he not a former acquaintance of yours, Guy?"

Lowder forced a laugh full of uneasiness.

"What a strange idea!" he exclaimed, not looking up from the red-cheeked apple he was paring with a hand that trembled visibly. "Why, the fellow was a tramp, a mere beggar, who had no doubt inquired the names of the wealthy county families, with a view to bettering his fortunes at the expense of their purses. My name stood somewhere near the top of his list, I fancy. I gave him a half-crown, and bade him begone."

Sir Arthur regarded his supposed son with a perplexed expression.

"But Guy," he said quietly, "you were in conversation with the fellow nearly an hour. Paxter saw him slink out of the Park after you dismissed him. It was then nearly two o'clock."

"Paxter? Ah, the steward!" muttered Lowder. "The fellow may have hung about the park after I told him to go. But, of course, I knew nothing of that. As I said before, the fellow is an utter stranger to me."

Sir Arthur did not reply, but his look of perplexity gave place to one of ill-concealed anxiety. He believed Lowder to be lying, and his vague distrust of him deepened strangely.

With a sigh, he relinquished a subject so unpleasant and unprofitable, and said :

"I have been thinking, Guy, of a wedding gift for you. I heard last week that the Roy farm, adjoining your Gildethorpe, is for sale. Formerly it was a part of Gildethorpe, and I have always thought it ought to belong to it again. The present owner is obliged to sell having encumbered himself with debts. And, in short, Guy, I have concluded to buy the Roy farm for you, to complete the little estate that came from your mother. I have made all the preliminary arrangements, and shall conclude the purchase to-morrow in the lawyer's office at Ardleigh, where I have an appointment with Mr. Roy at ten o'clock in the morning."

"It will be a princely gift, father," said Lowder, raising his head. "The Roy farm is one of the finest in the shire. How much are you to pay for it?"

"Two thousand pounds."

Lowder started again, and drooped his gaze

Two thousand pounds ! Why, it was the very sum he required to avert his impending ruin.

"How much of the amount will remain on mortgage?" he asked, striving to speak carelessly.

Sir Arthur looked surprised and hurt.

"When I make presents, Guy," he said, rather coldly, "I do not make them with drawbacks and encumbrances. I shall pay the money down and take a clear title."

"Of course," Lowder hastened to say, with a deprecating smile. "I should have taken that for granted, only that the sum is so large, and I know that you do

not bank at Ardleigh. But, no doubt, you will give your check on the Bank of Gloucester in payment of the sum?"

"No. On our return from town to-day, I found a letter from Mr. Roy awaiting me, in which he requested me to pay him in money, as he had some debts to pay to-morrow, notes to meet, and so on. On reading the note, I immediately sent Paxter over to Gloucester, and he was returning with the two thousand pounds in gold, when he saw your odd foreign visitor making his way out of the park. The money is now in my library safe."

Lowder cast down his eyes. There was a gleam in them at this announcement that, had Sir Arthur seen it, might have revealed to the Baronet something of the real character of the man who pretended to be his son.

"I should think it would be dangerous to have so large a sum of money in the house," remarked Lowder, trifling nervously with an almond. "Paxter might have been followed home from the bank by some scoundrel. I suppose you will take extra precautions against robbery?"

"No; I think extra precautions unnecessary. The doors and windows are amply secured. I may perhaps loosen Tiger, the watch dog, but I do not care to reveal to the servants, thoroughly as I trust them, that there is such an amount of money under this roof."

Lowder declared his approval of this resolution, and adroitly turned the subject, exhibiting a gayety in strong contrast to his recent silence and gloom.

The little party presently returned to the drawing-room. Lowder exerted himself to appear agreeable and fascinating, in which effort he was successful. Sir Arthur listened to his gay sallies with a thoughtful, pre-occupied air, but Blanche was as merry and bright and

witching as even she could well be, and Lowder's love for her received a new impetus.

Blanche played upon the grand piano, and the young betrothed pair sang together a variety of sweet old ballads, while Sir Arthur sat near the hearth, shading his eyes with his hands.

The evening passed swiftly. At nine o'clock tea was brought in on a tray. At ten, Blanche said good-night and withdrew, going up to her room. A little later, Lowder, professing to feel unusually tired and sleepy, also withdrew, retiring to his chamber.

Sir Arthur sat by the drawing-room fire until the little ormolu clock chimed the hour of eleven. Then he arose wearily, covered the dying fire with ashes, extinguished the lights, and made a tour of the lower floor of the house to assure himself that the windows and doors were well fastened. In spite of himself, the suggestions of Lowder had inspired him with a sense of uneasiness in regard to the safety of the money in the library safe. This sense of uneasiness clung to him as he went up to his room, and kept him awake long after he went to bed.

Meanwhile Lowder was in his private chamber, waiting! On entering his sitting-room, he had found a pleasant fire and lights. His dressing-gown hung across the chair, and his slippers were on the hearth-rug. Exchanging his coat and boots for these more comfortable articles of house attire, he walked to and fro the room softly, pausing often at his door to listen.

It seemed a long time to him before he heard Sir Arthur ascend the stairs wearily, and enter his own room across the hall.

"He will soon be asleep," he then muttered, resuming his almost noiseless walk. "How glum the Baronet seems of late! He finds it hard to have all this

billing and cooing going on under his very eyes. He is struggling with his love for Blanche in after a heroic fashion, but he could sooner tear his heart out than uproot his love for her. And I fancy he has another grief. He is disappointed in his son. He expected a different heir from the one he has now acknowledged. He does not find me as frank, open and truthful as he expected. One cannot be on one's guard all the time, and I have now and then given him glimpses of my real nature, quite unintentionally, and in spite of myself, and I fancy the glimpses appall him. But he does not suspect the truth—that I am not his son! And if I go on as I have begun, and entrench myself in a marriage with Blanche, I shall be safe, whatever happens. But everything depends upon how I meet this danger threatened by that cursed Italian!"

He quickened his pace, knitting his brows in a heavy scowl.

The reader may have guessed the scheme that was now agitating his soul. He had determined to possess himself by a bold robbery of the two thousand pounds in Sir Arthur's safe, and with the sum thus gained, purchase the silence and absence of Palestro.

"It will be no worse than what I have done already," he said to himself. "What I have already had from Sir Arthur is actually obtained from him by robbery. It belongs in reality to that idiot Guy. As to the money now in the safe, Sir Arthur means it for me, and I prefer the money to a farm. The question is, how am I to get it undetected?"

He considered the question at great length.

His pretty, small clock struck the hour of twelve, but still he was not ready to enter upon his nefarious undertaking. It rung out the half hour past midnight, and

Lowder started, as if the sound had been a summons to begin his treacherous and wicked task.

He extinguished his lights, and crept across the floor, opening his door softly, and peering out into the long and silent corridor. A light burned dimly against the wall, and the hall was full of shadows, but no living creature was visible. The silence of the dead of night filled the house.

Closing the door of his room behind him, Lowder crept silently across the dim corridor to the door of Sir Arthur's chamber.

All was still within. No light gleamed through the key-hole. Lowder listened intently, and heard the sound of low and regular breathing.

He turned the knob gently and opened the door peering into the room. A faint, dim, shadowy light pervaded the apartment, proceeding from the low fire dying slowly on the hearth. The dressing bureau, the easy-chair and other articles of furniture were but indistinctly revealed in the gloom.

Lowder pushed open the door yet further, and crept over the threshold. Sir Arthur was lying in his French bed, and his low regular breathing sounded like that of a sleeper. The white curtains that fell from the high canopy and draped his couch were parted so that Lowder could see the noble face lying back on the pillow, and could even see that the eyes were closed.

He crept into the room.

Sir Arthur's garments were lying across a chair, near the hearth, and just where the few dim rays of firelight were falling. Lowder knew in which pocket to look for the key of the library safe. He sidled toward the chair with the step of a cat, keeping a keen, anxious watch upon the bed. He took up the Baronet's waistcoat, and felt in its inner pocket for the treasure he sought. A

private note-book fell out, a bunch of keys, and finally a thin steel key—the key of the safe.

Lowder clutched it, and still keeping watch of the Baronet with a tigerish look, he began his retreat from the room. Slowly, softly, nearly silently, like some shadow of ill omen, he backed towards the door. Breathless, with an awful terror of discovery, he gained the threshold, and slipped into the hall. He closed the door gently, and made his way to a hall chair, where he sat down, ghastly, with eyes starting, and face bathed in a cold sweat which oozed from every pore.

“I would not go through that ordeal again for twice two thousand pounds,” he thought, with a convulsive trembling of his whole body. “I was never meant for a robber. Would to Heaven my lines had been cast in pleasant places—as pleasant as those of Guy Tressilian—and I might this night have been wealthy and honored, instead of the wretched being I am! But better this,” he added, beginning to recover his courage, “than to be the poor toiler I must have been as Jasper Lowder! Better wickedness and wealth than virtue and poverty!”

Jasper Lowder, like many another man who enters upon a life of crime and ill-doing, did not count the cost. A life of virtue and poverty with Hester and his boy would have had its cares, its toils, its severe privations, but his conscience would have been clear, his soul without stain, and he would have had joys which no life of gilded crime could bring him. And though now his existence was one of splendid ease, though he was known as the heir of a fine old county family and great estate, though he expected to some day write his name “Sir Guy Tressilian,” he carried an unquiet heart in his breast, a guilty soul alive with terrors, and he was obliged to plunge into newer crimes to sustain his false position.

Setting aside the great questions of right and wrong, looking at the matter after the manner of business men, did it pay him ?

He sat for a few minutes upon the hall chair, until he had ceased his trembling, and then he entered his own room, lighted one of his candles by a coal from his grate, and made his way like a shadow down the stairs, softly entering the library.

Closing the door after him, he held the light above his head, and surveyed the grand apartment, half fearful lest, after all, Sir Arthur might have left a sentinel in the room. But no one was there. The air was cold, the fire having long since died out. The long windows were shrouded with their damask curtains. The tall bookcases, lining the walls, and crowned with marble busts, looked shadowy, and the busts gleamed like ghostly faces, staring at the intruder from the depths of gloom.

Lowder was nervous and uneasy. He fancied that he heard a stealthy tread in the hall. Listening until he had persuaded himself that he was mistaken, he moved toward the safe.

There was a little delay in fitting the key into the lock, but presently the great door swung wide on its hinges, and the interior of the safe was displayed to the intruder.

Flashing the light up and down, he surveyed the drawers and shelves with an eager scrutiny. The object of which he was in search, a great canvas bag filled with gold, was upon the lowest shelf. He seized it, weighing it with his hands.

"How heavy it is !" he muttered. "And now I have got it, where am I to hide it? Fortunate that it is in gold. Sir Arthur could have traced the bank-notes. He always takes down the numbers."

He glanced over the deeds, leases and other documents lying at hand, took up and glanced over a packet of Guy Tressilian's letters to his father which had been carefully treasured, and then, not daring to linger longer, he lifted out the bag of money, and deposited it on the floor, preparatory to relocking the safe.

At that moment he fancied he heard a stealthy noise at the door. Glancing quickly in that direction, he saw that the door was slightly ajar, but he saw no person.

"Ah!" he thought, "I did not close the door perfectly. The wind has blown it from the latch. It's no matter. I am through now."

He closed and locked the safe. Then he paused, uncertain what to do next. He desired to make the robbery seem the act of a housebreaker. This he thought could be done by opening a window. He did not feel adequate to the task of restoring Sir Arthur's key to the place from which he had subtracted it, and therefore tossed it upon the floor.

The money remained to be disposed of. He closed the door for the second time that opened into the hall, without taking the precaution to look for the cause of its opening. Had he looked into the hall, he might have seen a drooping figure and a pale, distressful face, and a pair of anguished eyes that had watched his whole sinister proceeding in a dumb and awful amazement.

Lifting the bag of gold and extinguishing his candle, Jasper Lowder hurried to one of the long windows, of which he quickly undid the fastenings. He opened the window, and, with his burden closely clasped, gently lowered himself to the terrace. Once upon the ground, he ran along the green sward, turned the corner of the mansion, and hurried toward the park.

Penetrating the shadows to a lonely and secluded spot, seldom visited save by the park-keepers, he found

a hollow tree which he had previously remarked, and which had been permitted to remain on account of its great age and picturesque appearance. In the hollow heart of this old tree he thrust his stolen treasure.

"It will be safe here," he thought. "To-night I will give it to Palestro. I wish I might have arranged the robbery to make it seem more like the work of a skillful burglar, but I am too nervous, and have not time. The heir of Tressilian Court will not be suspected of stealing the money, and so long as I am not suspected I do not care who is. I can easily persuade Sir Arthur that it is the work of some bungling scoundrel who tracked Paxter home from Gloucester!"

Well satisfied with his night's exploit, he returned to the Court, and re-entered the mansion by the library window. The door leading into the hall was closed, and there was no indication that any one had entered the room in his absence.

Leaving the window open, Lowder crossed the floor noiselessly and crept up to his own chamber. He closed and locked his door, and sat down by his fire, a smile of successful villainy curling his lips.

"All is well!" he whispered. "And I am safe! So much for boldness and skill!"

Ah! if he had known that there had been a secret witness to his crime!



CHAPTER X.

HELP AT LAST.

The situation of Olla Rymple in the brigands' cavern in Italy—threatened with the immediate and horrible death of her two faithful servitors, and unable to save them save by the utter sacrifice of herself—was sufficiently appalling to overwhelm a heart braver even than that of our brave, noble, bright young heroine.

It would be untrue to say that her high heroism did not desert her at that moment. Mrs. Popley and honest, affectionate Jim Popley, were very dear to her. The one had been her nurse, and both had been her attendants from her childhood. Their pale, anguished faces and cries for mercy were like so many daggers plunged into her heart.

Could she deliberately speak the word that was to be the signal for their destruction?

Her star-like eyes were flooded with tears. Claspings her hands in a terror of entreaty, she looked up at her smiling enemy—the triumphing Red Carvelli—and cried out :

“ You cannot be so wicked ! They have never harmed you ! They are only humble, honest people whose misfortune it is that they have been so true to me ! If

there is a spark of good in your soul, take back your cruel words, and let them live !”

The brigand chief smiled disagreeably, revealing all his white teeth.

“Ha ! So I have crushed your spirit, have I, my haughty, untamed eaglet ?” he demanded. “And you plead to me for mercy ? Again I say how little you know me ! You had better plead to the tiger to relinquish the prey she has between her teeth, as plead with me to release this couple. They are of no consequence in themselves, but it is not in the nature of woman to see even a faithful servant killed before her eyes when she has but to speak to save them ! Their fate, Miladi, is in your hands, not mine !”

“Oh, cruel ! cruel !” sobbed Olla, in wild despair.

“Nay, fair Signorina ; it is not I who am cruel. It is you ! You can save them if you will !”

Olla only moaned in her anguish.

“Hush, Miss Olla, my poor lamb !” cried her old nurse, her anguished old face lighting up with the glow of a perfect devotion. “You must not promise to marry that monster to save me ! A life gained at such a price would be worse to me than death. And what is death ? Only a passage from all these troubles into a land of brightness and peace ! I shall be better off, my darling. And every one has to die sooner or later. I have had a long and pleasant life, and if it were not for the leaving you, I should not find it hard to die now. Tell him you will not marry him, Miss Olla. Do no evil for the sake of a fancied good.”

“Do not marry that robber to save us, Miss Olla,” said Jim Popley, his face reflecting his mother’s devotion. “I say as mother says. And I say, too, that if you marry him to save us, I won’t have life on such terms.

I will kill myself as soon as I have my freedom. I will never live to witness your misery !”

The devotion of the pair but added to Olla's despairing anguish. Nobility knows neither wealth nor social gradations, and these two servants were as truly noble as any high-born, titled personage in their native land. Olla's heart warmed to them even in her present misery.

“You hear, Signore ?” she asked of the brigand chief.

“I hear !” he answered grimly. “I have but to repeat what I have said before, that you shall be my wife whether you will or no ! I am willing to have the priest say his canting words over our union. Indeed, since I have set out to have an orthodox wedding, I will have it for the sake of my men who want enlivening. If you choose to hold out until your servants are killed, do so. But my wife you will be this very night, and that by the sanction of this trembling priest. You should begin to know me by this time !”

His determined voice, his savage words, the fierce gleam of his eyes, all told Olla that she was struggling vainly. Her low, tremulous cry, as the truth came home to her soul, thrilled through the cavern.

Guy Tressilian, who had been until now passive and bewildered in the grasp of the brigand who had seized him, roused himself at that wailing cry. The old passionate fire blazed in his blue, fearless eyes. The glow of resolution mantled his face. A stern and awful smile gathered about his mouth. He looked stern, handsome and terrible.

The cloud that had pressed so heavily upon his brain was, as we have said, nearly lifted. But the merest veil shrouded from him his past. His intellect and his heart had aroused from their slumbers. He was an imbecile no longer, but a man endowed with manhood's highest attributes.

The lion spirit that had lain dormant within him since his shipwreck now burst its thralls. With a cry that echoed through the whole cavern, he wrenched himself from the grasp of his astonished keeper, tore from the hand of the latter a pistol, and bounded upon the dais, placing himself at Olla's side in the attitude of a protector.

Had a bomb burst in the cavern at that moment, the people within it could not have been more startled.

Olla had not realized how great a change the simple operation performed by the brigand "doctor" had wrought in her charge. Her astonishment, therefore, nearly equalled that of Carvelli, who started back in amazement, crying out :

"How is this? Is this the 'imbecile' whom we took captive? Or has he deceived us all, and but played the imbecile?"

No one answered him. The "doctor's" face was as blank and wonder-stricken at that of his comrades.

The Red Carvelli turned his wondering puzzled stare upon the spirited young man, whose sternly glowing eyes and commanding expression increased his bewilderment.

Olla, taking advantage of the momentary lull, surveyed the rows of faces along the walls. Not one evinced a kindly feeling for her. All were stolid, more or less brutal, and eager for the promised amusement of a wedding. Not one pair of dark eyes gave her a friendly look. But one of the men, better dressed than the others, who was the lieutenant of the outlaw band, and who had alternated glances of admiration at Olla with sullen looks at Carvelli, and who was evidently a discontented and ambitious spirit, let fall, as by accident, a gleaming stiletto.

As it spun to the floor, falling with a ringing sound,

Olla sprang forward and caught it up. Then as quickly she returned to the dais, and to Tressilian's side, the weapon gleaming in her hand.

"Now I am prepared to answer you, Signore," she cried, her great dusky eyes flashing. "You have asked me to be your wife. I say I will not marry you. I am not yet so weak that I care to save my life at the expense of all that is dearer to me than life. You have threatened to kill my friends, and to make me your wife by force. I will free myself from you and rejoin them in the other land in the moment you carry your threat into execution. God will surely pardon me for sending myself into His presence unsummoned in this awful strait."

She held the stiletto pointed at her heart with a hand as firm as in her happiest hours. She faced the brigand with a countenance strangely calm and steadfast, and glowing with her terrible resolution.

"She shall not die alone!" cried Guy Tressilian, his clear voice ringing through the vaulted cavern with the force and richness of bugle notes. "This pistol has five chambers all loaded. In the moment Olla Rymple falls, you brigand chief, will also die! More. Lay but a hand upon those poor people whom she loves to harm them, give but the order for their death, and that instant you shall die!" Tressilian looked at that moment like an avenging Fate. Carvelli quailed before him. The brigands regarded him as a master spirit. The men who held the two Popleys in their grip began to cower, lest the bright and daring young Englishman should turn his weapon against them.

For the pace of a few moments a dead silence reigned. A pin might have been heard to drop in the great cavern.

Olla felt her soul thrill with a new feeling toward

Tressilian. She had pitied him with a yearning tenderness, much like that a sister might have felt. But now, as he revealed himself to her in much of his natural character, she was proud of him ; she respected him ; her soul kindled within her with a shy, strange feeling, which she had neither time nor skill to analyze. Was this feeling love ?

The silence was broken by a loud, hoarse laugh from the brigand chief.

" Affairs have come to a pretty pass when I am defied in my own domain !" he cried. " We will see if the prisoners are to rule their jailers ! Ho, there, my men ! At my word of command, you will take this Inglese in close captivity."

With a wave of his hand he designated the men whom he desired to undertake the service.

They emerged from the ranks with an evident dislike for the task before them. And indeed few men would have liked to assail that haughty, upright figure, which stood firm as a rock, or come too near that sternly awful face with its blue, blazing eyes like burning stars.

" Let your men come on," said Tressilian coolly. " They have no ' imbecile ' to deal with, but a man who will defend his charge to the death. Let them come."

The men abruptly retreated to the ranks from which they had emerged. They had no desire to obey an invitation given in that voice and in that manner.

" Cowards !" cried Carvelli. " You shall see me subdue this haughty braggart. Look !"

He drew his poinard and bounded toward Tressilian.

The young Englishman leaped aside, avoiding the onslaught, and fired his pistol. It took effect in the breast of Carvelli.

With a yell that echoed through the cavern, the brig-

and chief moved onward toward Tressilian, tottered, reeled, and fell.

In an instant, as the smoke of the pistol cleared, all was wild confusion and noise.

The Popleys, finding themselves loosened in the general turmoil, flew to the side of their young mistress. Jim Popley caught up a pistol from the form of the prostrate outlaw, and the four captives retreated to a distant corner and stood at bay.

The "doctor" hastened to the aid of his chief and examining the wound, pronounced it not dangerous. Carvelli struggled to his feet, and glared at Tressilian with a look of hatred.

"I meant to keep the fellow alive," he cried, "but no man can wound me and live to boast of his prowess. Kill the Inglese where he stands! Fall upon him, my men. Shoot down the whole party save the girl. Let not a hair of her head be harmed. I will exact from her full vengeance for this night's affair! On them, comrades! Strike them down where they stand!"

That moment was the culmination of all the perils and sufferings of Tressilian and Olla.

They put themselves in an attitude of defence, with the resolve written upon each heroic face, to die bravely and together.

The frantic voice of the Red Carvelli again rang through the chamber, urging on his men to the attack.

Carbines and pistols were presented. The outlaws, grim and hard, waited but the action of one bolder than the rest to open the terrible work of destruction.

But that work did not begin. The two parties were still measuring each other with their fierce, burning glances, when a sentinel rushed into the cavern, panting, breathless, panic-stricken.

"The troops! the troops!" he shouted. "They are

here—at our very door ! Canaro has played us false. Madre di Dio ! Here they come !”

And even as he spoke a band of troops came filing into the cavern, having followed close at the heels of the sentinel. The hundred lights flashed upon their gay uniforms and equipments. The steel of their weapons glittered like stars. The brigands regarded them in an utter and terrible dismay.

And well they might. They were caught like rats in a trap. Their mountain fastness, impregnable to force, had yielded to treachery.

And while the outlaws stood as if turned to stone, the leader of the troops cried out in a trumpet voice the single word that, to the brigands, came as the knell of doom—the word :

“SURRENDER !”

CHAPTER XI.

HOMeward Bound.

The appearance of the Neapolitan troops at the brigand's cavern, at the fateful moment that beheld the crisis of Olla's and Tressilian's perils, can be briefly explained.

As the reader has been informed, the recent outrage inflicted by the Red Carvelli, in depriving an English subject of his ears, had startled the Italian Government from its long apathy and indifference toward the outlaws swarming the country, and making the very name of Italy a by-word among the nations ; and an expedition had accordingly been ordered to proceed against

the brigands, with orders to exterminate or capture the entire band. A price had also been put upon the head of the Red Carvelli.

This expedition had quitted Naples quietly, almost secretly, on the very morning on which Olla and Tressilian, with their attendants, had set out in great haste in a voiture, under the guidance of the treacherous Lipari, for Termoli. In consequence of private information, the officer in command of the troops directed his search among the ravines and gullies of the Monte del Matese.

He had been thus employed two days and a night, finding himself, at the close of the second day, apparently no nearer success than at first.

As the sun was setting at the close of this second day, however, and the small body of pursuers had come to a halt at the very spot which had witnessed the capture of Olla and her party on the previous day, an Italian laborer, apparently a vine-dresser, came singing along the road. The captain of the troops had accosted him, making inquiries of him. The vine-dresser, like many other inhabitants of that neighborhood, was an ally and spy of the Red Carvelli. Being shrewd, and not recognizing the force of the old saying, that there is "honor among thieves," he had seen an opportunity for his own advancement, and had offered to betray the brigands and guide the troops to the outlaw's mountain fastness upon the promise of the payment to him of the large reward offered for Carvelli's capture.

The payment of this sum had been guaranteed to him, and he had thereupon guided the troops to the hidden retreat in the depths of the gloomy defile. Their approach in the gloom of the early evening, as they crept silently along amid the shadows, had not been detected by any sentinel until the treacherous

guide Canaro had led them up the steps in the rock to the very mouth of the concealed cavern.

The preoccupation of the brigands in the events occurring within the subterranean chamber had favored the pursuers, and when the sentinel had discovered the approach, and rushed in to give the alarm, they had followed at his heels.

Never was an arrival more opportune. Five minutes later, and they whose varying fortunes we have been portraying would have been ruthlessly slain.

As that summons to surrender rang through the apartment, the brigands retreated hastily to the dais, their prisoners all forgotten, and faced the intruders with sullen glances of defiance.

"Surrender!" repeated the brigand chief, his eyes blazing. "Never! If you want us, take us, but we'll make a stiff fight, I warn you."

He raised his carbine, and glared at the band of intruders with greedy, wolfish eyes, as if seeking one particular face.

"Resistance is useless," replied the captain of the troops. "You are hemmed in. Escape is impossible. Again I command you to surrender!"

At that moment the pale, anxious face of Canaro emerged from the group of soldiers, and the traitor regarded his late master with speculating eyes.

As quick as thought, Carvelli fired at him, wounding him in the head. With a wild shriek, the traitor leaped into the air and fell dead.

"So much for treachery!" cried Carvelli. "That score is wiped out. Come on, Signore Capitano. Come!"

It was evident that the brigands meant to resist to the death. The army officer gave a brief word of com-

mand to his men, and from the throats of their ready carbines poured a deadly volley.

The noise in that confined space was absolutely deafening, mingled as it was with shouts and curses and groans. The smoke was impenetrable. Under cover of the sudden gloom, Olla and her friends crept from their perilous position to a corner nearer the entrance, the two women ensconcing themselves in a rude niche in the wall, which was amply protected by two jutting rocks.

Tressilian and Popley hurried to join the ranks of the troops, and to take their parts in the task of capturing the brigands.

The outlaws responded to the sally of the troops by an irregular volley. Carvelli urged on his men, shouting like a madman. A perfect pandemonium was inaugurated. Presently a hand to hand battle was raging, and shots, shrieks, groans and prayers filled the dim chamber. Now and then a random shot brought down a lantern from the wall. The fire was trampled out. The table was upset, and its display of food and wine were trodden under foot.

The conflict was short, sharp and terrible. So long as Carvelli's frenzied voice was heard animating his men, the outlaws fought like tigers. But at last those fierce tones were concentrated in one wild dying wail, and the Red Carvelli fell under the dagger of the army captain—dead. His lieutenant was killed a minute later, and, deprived of their leaders, panic-stricken, doomed, the miserable remnant of the band cried out unanimously, announcing their surrender.

"Lay down your arms!" cried the Captain of the troops. "Back against the wall there. When the smoke clears, we will see what is to be done with you."

The smoke cleared presently sufficiently for the Cap-

tain's purpose. The rocky floor was found to be strewn with dead and dying outlaws. Of the attacking party but five had been killed outright, and but seven had been wounded.

The surviving brigands were duly fettered, and the leader of the troops then turned his attention to the small party of English captives whose presence he had before remarked.

"Who are you?" he demanded of Tressilian. "What have you been doing here?"

"We were prisoners, Signore," returned Tressilian politely. "Your prowess has released us. Olla!"

He held out his hand, and Olla and Mrs. Popley emerged from their retreat, the former coming forward and taking the hand of Tressilian.

"The brigand chief has captured yonder priest," continued Tressilian, indicating the worthy priest, who now advanced from the shadow of a projecting rock behind which he had hidden himself, "and was in the act of attempting to force himself as a husband upon this young English lady, whom he captured yesterday. He would have killed us all had you not arrived at the moment you did."

The priest confirmed Tressilian's story.

"You are free now, Milord," said the Captain, raising his hat courteously, and greatly impressed with the noble carriage and handsome face of Tressilian, and the glowing beauty of Olla. "We will escort you back to Naples, should you desire to return there. We shall start within the hour."

"Yes, we will return to Naples," said Olla. "It will be better to do so than to try to procure conveyance to Tremoli. And I now believe," she added, "that no necessity has existed for this flight across the country."

It was all a conspiracy between Carvelli and his sister, the keeper of the Vesuvius Inn."

The Captain paid but little heed to the last sentence. His wounded and dead remained to be cared for. The former were speedily made as comfortable as circumstances would permit, and the surgeon of the troops then applied himself to the task of ministering to the wounded outlaws. The Captain deputed a number of men to carry out and bury the dead on both sides, and the rites of sepulture were performed in the lonely and gloomy defile by the light of torches.

The melancholy duty over, the cavern was investigated, and its spoils taken possession of by the victors. Food and wine were found in one of the cells which served as a larder, and the men ate and drank.

It was midnight when the party quitted the cavern and set out on the return to Naples. One of the brigands indicated the spot where the horses belonging to the band might be found, and Olla, Tressilian and the Popleys were well mounted. The brigands were also mounted, the captured spoils were secured upon led horses, and the cavalcade threaded the narrow and dark defile, gained the high road, and set out at a brisk canter for Naples.

It was a strange ride that, through the lovely, pleasant night. The moon arose, and the stars shone. The vineyards, the pretty, picturesque cottages and low cabins along the road-side, the orange groves, the olive orchards—all these had a strange beauty, seen in the moonlight and starlight. The Captain and his officers talked together, congratulating themselves upon their success, which was expected to make them famous. The troops jested and laughed, already forgetful of their dead comrades. The prisoners rode on, strongly guarded, in sullen silence. The Popleys kept near to their young

mistress, and Olla and Tressilian rode a little apart from the others, but so close together that Guy could grasp the girl's bridle-rein.

The relations between the two had greatly changed since they had before traversed that lonely road. On the journey out from Naples, Olla had been the protector, Guy the gentle, clinging dependent. But now Tressilian assumed the care of Olla as his right. He slackened his pace when she was tired ; he led her horse when they came to some dangerous point in the road ; he talked to her cheerfully, drawing from her all her history, and learning at full length all she knew, or supposed she knew, concerning himself, and proved himself so agreeable, so gently courteous, so attentive and so tender, that Olla's respect for him deepened with every moment.

"His sleeping soul has waked at last," she thought, with a half sigh, as she looked up into the grave, handsome face framed in masses of tawny hair, and lighted up by soul-lit eyes. "I meant to be his sister—his friend ; but now—"

Again she sighed.

If her heart was unquiet, so also was that of Guy Tressilian. His ardent nature, bursting from the bonds that had held it in a close confinement, turned to this glorious young girl as to a shrine. Her dusky eyes, soft and radiant, were brighter to him than the glowing stars. Her small, noble head, with its wealth of jetty tresses, her bright dark face, her tender mouth, her slight, lithe figure, all made up a picture of rare spirit and beauty, and he felt his whole heart go out to her in a worshipping tenderness.

Yet he dared not express his feeling save in an occasional rapt glance which Olla failed to see.

Mile after mile was traversed in the moonlight and

starlight. The night wore on, and the gray dawn of the lovely Italian morning broke at last.

At about six o'clock, before Naples was actually astir, the cavalcade rode slowly past the Vesuvius Inn. The hostelry was already open, and Giuditta, in her bright, peasant costume, stood in the open doorway.

She glanced at the small body of troops in careless scrutiny, but suddenly started as she beheld the prisoners under close guard. One of them, the "Doctor," made a gesture to her with his fettered hands—a gesture that declared to her the truth, that her brother was dead and the band destroyed.

She reeled and leaned heavily against the door-post, at the same moment that she beheld Olla and Tressilian riding side by side, and followed closely by the Popleys.

The sight of Tressilian free affected her more than all else. The threatened loss of her "golden goose," from whose close detention she and Palestro expected to realize a fortune, for a moment deprived her of sight, even of all sensation.

At length she recovered herself sufficiently to look after the departing riders.

"Guiseppe was not among the prisoners," she said to herself. "He has sworn never to be taken alive. He is killed, as that despairing gesture of the 'doctor' told me! Killed! And Sir Tresolino is free! He will go to England. I must write to Jacopo by to-day's mail. I dare not telegraph, lest others see the message. Pray the saints that Jacopo may have secured his fortune by this time!"

She hurried into the inn to write her letter.

Meanwhile the party rode on, entering the city. Taking their leave of the Captain, with many expressions of their gratitude to him for their timely rescue, Olla and Tressilian, with their attendants, proceeded to

the Hotel Della Crocelle, where they ordered rooms and a breakfast.

Both of these orders were promptly attended to. After partaking of tea and toast, the four, in defiance to all hygienic rules, retired to their several beds, where they slept soundly until noon.

At that hour they met again in their common sitting-room. The greeting between Tressilian and Olla was warm but quiet. They were standing with hands clasped in each other's, when Jim Popley came in, as ruddy and good-natured as of old.

"If you please, Miss Olla," he exclaimed, "there is a steamer of the *Two Sicilies*' line which sails for Marseilles at three this afternoon. I have taken cabin passage for four persons in her. I have also made inquiries, and cannot find that Mr. Gower has come to Naples at all in his pursuit of you. He has no doubt gone on to England upon some false trail, or thinking to intercept you there."

Olla was greatly encouraged with this view of the case. Tressilian shared her joy. Dinner was presently served, and after the meal the Popleys took their repast in a sitting-room across the hall. At half-past two o'clock, the four proceeded in a carriage to the steamer, which was lying alongside the pier. They went on board hastening to their state-rooms, where they remained until after the steamer was under weigh—and all chance of their detention on any pretence whatsoever had passed.

The journey to Marseilles, occupying some three days, passed without any incident worthy of mention. Olla and Tressilian being unafflicted with sea-sickness, paced the deck day and evening arm in arm, and in those hours of continuous communion they grew to

know each other as they could not have done in months of ordinary social intercourse.

They disembarked at Marseilles on Tuesday afternoon, and proceeded directly to the Grand Hotel Noailles—the same hotel at which Jasper Lowder had stopped, on his arrival at Marseilles from Palermo, and where he had registered his name as “Guy Tressilian.”

They procured suitable rooms. Popley, once more alert and business-like, registered their arrival as that of “Mr. Jasper Lowder and party.”

Being greatly fatigued, they remained at the Hotel Noailles until the following morning, when they proceeded by the 11.30 train to Paris—the same train by which Lowder had journeyed some weeks before.

They arrived in Paris at about seven the following morning. Thinking it quite possible that her guardian might have placed some one upon the look-out for her at the principal hotels, Olla consulted with Tressilian and decided to go to some small, family hotel, where they would remain until the next day, Tressilian beginning to grow feverish from fatigue and his long excitement, and positively requiring rest.

An examination of Bradshaw's Guide was entered upon, and Olla selected a quiet, family hotel in the Rue Castiglione, but a few doors from the Rue Rivoli, and of course quite near the Tuileries gardens. They drove to the hotel, secured rooms, and entered upon their needed interval of rest with a feeling of security.

This hotel, as it proved, was the best for their purpose which they could have selected, being quiet, and but little visited by the wealthier or more fashionable of English tourists. Mr. Gower would never have suspected his ward of sufficient shrewdness to select such a stopping-place, and whatever provision he might have

made to intercept her at larger hotels, had entirely overlooked this quiet hostelry.

It was, in fact, a resort for the refugees of all nations. A tall and melancholy Pole, whom his sympathetic fellow-boarders were wont to consider an exiled Polish prince, stalked gloomily through the corridors, and sat like a death's head at the dinner-table, the only meal which the guests shared together. A Russian boor, loud of voice and manner; a Russian "princess" with a step like a ballet-dancer's, and a face singularly like that of an English adventuress; a few French bachelors; a few "exiled" English people—exiled by reason of debts, or residing at this pension on account of impecuniosity, and flattering themselves that they were "living abroad"—these with a couple of spinsters, one Irish and the other Scotch, and both quite intolerable, and the usual number of adventurers, and adventuresses, made up the "society" of the quiet family hotel.

And here Olla and Tressilian remained, with their attendants, until some twenty-four hours later, when they set out for England by way of Calais and Dover. They arrived at Calais a little after one in the afternoon; had a pleasant, if rather rough, voyage across the Channel, and landed at Dover at half-past three.

The journey to London through the gray December afternoon by the swift express train was duly accomplished. The night had long since fallen, with mist and rain and sleet, when, at six o'clock, the travellers alighted at the Victoria station in London.

Where should they go now? A feeling of utter forlornness crept over the young pair as they stood upon the crowded platform, watching the meetings of friends and lovers. One after another of the new arrivals by the train entered waiting cabs and were driven to their

homes, or to hotels which were but way-houses in their journey to pleasant homes in the country.

But these homeless ones scarcely knew where to go. Tressilian's name and past were a sealed book to him. The bustle of the London station was strange to him. And he was feverish and tired. To his recent animation had succeeded a strange apathy and melancholy. Olla feared that he would sink back into his recent imbecility, and she was desirous of consulting a surgeon in his behalf as early as possible.

As for herself, the young girl had no friends save the Pughs, whom she had sought at Palermo, and failed to find. She knew their London address, but she could not drive directly to their house with Tressilian and her attendants.

"We must go to a hotel," she said desperately. "I never wanted a home as I want one to-night! We will go to the Victoria Hotel. It is here at the station—directly over our heads."

Popley took the light luggage in his hands, Olla slipped her arm into that of Tressilian and the little party made its way through the gloom and sleet into the hotel.

CHAPTER XII.

A GIANT SHADOW.

Upon the morning subsequent to Jasper Lowder's dastardly robbery of Sir Arthur Tressilian's safe, the former made his appearance in the breakfast-room at the usual hour, a little pale and apprehensive, but as carefully attired as usual.

Sir Arthur was already in the room, and alone. He greeted Lowder gravely, yet pleasantly. Whatever his disappointment or distrust of his supposed son, it did not affect his manner. At the first glance into the Baronet's face the usurper knew that the previous night's robbery had not yet been discovered. There was no glance of suspicion in Sir Arthur's kindly eyes, no shadow of anger or annoyance upon the dark and handsome face.

It was plainly not Sir Arthur Tressilian who had been the secret, unseen witness of the robbery.

"The discovery of his loss is to come," thought Jasper Lowder. "I wonder how he will take it. I wish it were over."

He held out his white and jewelled hand to the Baronet, who clasped it lightly. The two exchanged greetings, and at that moment Purmton and his assistants entered, bearing the hot-water dishes.

Sir Arthur looked toward the door rather anxiously and said :

"Blanche is late this morning. Prumton, go up to Miss Irby's room and say to her that breakfast waits."

The portly butler hastened on his errand. He presently returned, a shadow on his round face, and said :

"Miss Irby is not well this morning. Cressy, her maid, says Miss Blanche has a severe headache, and begs you to excuse her."

The anxious look on Sir Arthur's face deepened. He took his place at the table, however and Lowder also seated himself. Sir Arthur waited upon his supposed son, and then carved a delicate morsel of broiled bird, which he placed upon a hot plate, with a buttered roll.

"Bring a tray, Purmton," he said, "and a cup of cof-

fee. You will take these up to Miss Blanche, and tell her I hope she will be well by luncheon time."

Purmton executed these orders as they were given.

Sir Arthur and Lowder lingered over the breakfast, but both were quiet, saying little. When the meal was concluded, the Baronet glanced at his watch, remarking :

"It is half-past eight already, Guy. I am to meet Mr. Roy at ten, and before seeing him I want an interview with my lawyer, who has been investigating the title of Roy farm thoroughly. I want you to accompany me to the lawyer's. We will go the library now, take out our money, and prepare for our business."

He led the way to the library, Lowder following, his heart beating like a drum.

On opening the library door, a gust of wind tore it from Sir Arthur's hand, and he saw at a glance, on entering the room, that the window was open, thus causing that strange, violent draught.

"How careless !" ejaculated Lowder. "Purmton has left the window open all night, and when you had two thousand pounds in the house ! You ought to discharge him, father."

Sir Arthur paid no attention to this exclamation. He glanced at the window, then at the safe.

"Shut the door, Guy," he said calmly.

Lowder did so.

"When I came into this room at a late hour last night," said the Baronet, "that window was carefully secured. I looked to all the windows and doors myself. Purmton is not to blame. I must see if my money is safe."

He felt in his pocket for the key.

"It is gone!" he exclaimed. "I am sure I put the key in my pocket last night, as usual—"

"There it is on the floor!" exclaimed Lowder, pointing it out. "You must have dropped it last night at the moment you thought you were putting it in your pocket. The safe does not seem to have been disturbed, judging by the locked door. Perhaps, after all, the housemaid has been in here this morning and opened the window to air the room."

The Baronet did not reply. He went to the safe, unlocked it, and threw open one of its massive doors.

At the first glance, he started back.

"The money is gone!" he ejaculated.

Lowder sprang to the Baronet's side.

"Impossible!" he cried.

"You see for yourself!" said Sir Arthur. "The money has been stolen!"

Lowder pretended to search the safe, and said at length, as if reluctantly:

"It is clear that there is no money here. Somebody must have stolen it. Perhaps Paxter was tracked from Gloucester by some professional burglar—"

"How should a professional burglar know just where to look for it?" interrupted the Baronet. "I know that key was in my pocket when I went to bed. It must have been taken out of my waistcoat pocket after I slept. It is strange I did not awaken if a burglar entered my room!"

He went to the window, and carefully examined it. He lowered himself from it, and looked closely at the turf beneath. Then he returned to the library, and looked at Lowder with a pale face, and anxious, troubled eyes.

"The window is opened on the inner side," he said. "No glass is broken. There has been no violent entry

into the house. Evidently some person got out of this window last night—but just as evidently he got in again !”

Lowder started, his face flushing hotly.

“What makes you think so ?” he stammered.

“The double track is plainly visible. I see that he came and went. Unless he had a confederate in the house to admit him, he did not enter at this window, since it was fastened on the inside. I will see if all the doors and windows elsewhere were found as usual this morning.”

He rang the bell, and when a servant appeared, ordered Purmton to be sent to him.

The butler made his appearance.

“Come in and shut the door, Purmton,” said Sir Arthur. “Who opened the house this morning ?”

“I did, Sir Arthur, as usual,” responded the butler, glancing from the calm face of his employer to the excited one of Lowder. “I closed the house last night and opened it this morning.”

“Did you find any doors or windows open ?” demanded the Baronet.

“No, sir. How could they be ? Why, I fastened them all the last thing before I went to bed last night, as I just said, Sir Arthur.”

“Has the housemaid—it’s an unnecessary question, however—been in the room this morning ?”

“No, Sir Arthur.”

“I have been robbed, Purmton,” declared the Baronet, still calmly. “I had two thousand pounds in gold in that safe last night when I went to bed and the key was in my pocket. This morning I find the key on the floor here, that window yonder open, and my money stolen !”

He looked at the old man keenly, as if he would read

his soul. Purmton, flushed and excited, was full of alarm and protestations and wonderings, and his grief at his master's loss, and his innocence of any previous knowledge of it, were plainly apparent to Sir Arthur.

"Who could have been so mean and base?" cried the old butler. "It must have been some burglar—"

"It was not the act of a burglar," said Sir Arthur decidedly. "You found the doors and windows closed this morning, and secured. Some one went out at this window, opening it from the inside; but that person returned to the house, leaving the window open to suggest burglars. I do not need to be a skilled detective to come to my present conclusion. The robber was one of my own household!"

"Oh, no, Sir Arthur," pleaded Purmton, tears of distress in his eyes. "There is not one in the house capable of such an act!"

"The facts speak for themselves—don't they?" asked Lowder sharply.

Purmton wrung his hands.

"Oh, Sir Arthur," he cried, "have up all the servants in the great hall, and question them. They have all lived with you years and years. There is not a kinder master in all the shire, and the servants love you too well to wrong you by a pin's value!"

Sir Arthur seemed touched by the butler's appeal; but he shook his head, as he said sternly:

"My dear old Purmton, I have trusted my servants fully and implicitly. I should not know which to accuse in a case like this. But I shall not be in too great haste to accuse any one. I will not insult my honest servants by suspecting them of a heinous crime. I shall investigate this matter closely, and in the meantime I desire you to keep silence in regard to it. I may find it necessary to send for a detective from Scotland Yard. I do

not intend to submit to my loss without an effort to regain the money, and discover the daring thief who enters my chamber boldly in the dead of night, and who steals my substance ; but until I give you liberty to speak, I command your silence !”

“ I will be as silent as the grave, Sir Arthur. But you—you have no suspicions—”

“ Not as yet,” said Sir Arthur, somewhat bitterly. “ All that is to come. You may go now, Purmton. And remember to keep silence !”

The butler withdrew with bowed head and troubled visage.

“ How agitated the old fellow seemed when you announced your loss, father !” observed Lowder insidiously, desirous at all events of averting suspicion from himself. “ He grew as pale as death, and then flushed up strangely—”

“ Hush, Guy ! I would stake my life on Purmton’s honesty. He has lived with me five-and-twenty years. I have tried him in a hundred ways, and know him to be integrity itself.”

Lowder looked abashed.

“ There—there is Mrs. Goss,” he suggested.

“ Can you direct suspicion upon the motherly old housekeeper who loves you as if you were her own son ?” demanded the Baronet, in surprise and annoyance. “ Guy, I thought you appreciated the honor and truth of that simple, unworldly soul. She rob me ! I would sooner believe that any other did it.”

“ I only mentioned her name because it occurred to me first,” stammered the impostor. “ Of course, I knew her incapable of such a—a crime. But there are the servants.”

“ They did not know I had money in the house. And neither did Mrs. Goss.”

"Paxter knew it," said Lowder. "I have a high opinion of Paxter, but he has a large family, and lives ambitiously, and the temptation may have overcome him. He knows the house. He knows where you keep the safe key. He brought the money from Gloucester, and was the only one who saw you deposit it in the safe. He might have returned in the evening, concealed himself in the house, and at a later hour effected the robbery."

"Impossible! He who went out of that window returned by it."

"Paxter might have been artful enough to come back to the window."

Sir Arthur was cruelly agitated. He refused to suspect Paxter, his faithful old steward, of ingratitude and treachery so foul.

"I must think the matter over," he said. "I think I shall have to send for a detective. At present my mind is in a fog. You had better go over to Ardleigh, Guy, and tell the lawyer that I cannot carry out that transaction to-day. You may explain the matter to him, under promise of secrecy. In the meantime I will study this case."

Glad to escape from the Baronet's presence, Lowder withdrew to order his horse, and to attire himself for his ride.

Some twenty minutes later he rode away from the Court upon his errand.

He had scarcely vanished beyond the lodge gates, and Sir Arthur was in the midst of his unpleasant "brown study," when a timid knock was heard at the library door, and Cressy, Blanche's maid, entered the apartment.

"If you please, Sir Arthur," she said, timidly, "Miss Blanche would like to see you in her room immediate."

Sir Arthur's loss was forgotten on the instant.

"Is—is she ill?" he demanded, turning pale.

"No, Sir Arthur. She has something important to say to you, she told me to say. She is not well, but she isn't downright ill."

"I will go to her at once," declared the Baronet.

Cressy withdrew, and Sir Arthur hurriedly locked his safe and quitted the library, ascending to Blanche's room.

The apartments of the young heiress comprised a handsome suite upon the second floor, overlooking the lawn and the river. Sir Arthur knocked at the sitting-room door, and Blanche's voice, low and sweet, and so sad that it thrilled him strangely, bade him enter.

He opened the door and went in.

The room which he had thus entered was large and square, one of the brightest, warmest, sunniest sitting-rooms to be found anywhere in home-loving England. A fire, indispensable to winter comfort, glowed genially in the grate. A *jardiniere* of plants ornamented one broad window-shelf. A swinging shelf of choice books, musical instruments, a pretty basket of embroidery, were visible in various parts of the room. It seemed by far lighter and brighter in this pretty room than outside where the day was cold and dismal.

Upon a silken lounge near the fire, Blanche was half reclining. She arose at her guardian's entrance, and came forward to meet him with trembling steps. She looked pale and ill. Her golden hair streamed in a wild confusion over her white dressing-gown; the blue veins seemed starting from her temples; and her gray eyes were strangely large in size, and strangely piteous in their expression.

Sir Arthur was startled—alarmed—by her appearance.

"Why, Blanche," he cried, taking her hand, "you are

ill ! Your hand is like fire ! I must send at once for the doctor !”

“No, Guardy, no !” exclaimed Blanche, in a voice sadly unlike her usual chirping, merry tones. “I am not ill in body. It is my mind.”

“Your mind !” said Sir Arthur, perplexed. “Do you mean that you are in trouble ?”

The young girl nodded gravely. She could not speak.

“What trouble can affect you thus, my little Blanche ?” demanded the Baronet, drawing her to a seat beside himself upon the lounge. “Your appearance frightens me. Tell me what has happened to grieve you. Tell me as if I were your father, in whose place I stand to you to-day.”

Blanche wrung her hands piteously.

“Oh, Guardy,” she said, in a choking voice, “How can I tell you ? I did not think it would be so hard. I cannot—I cannot !”

Sir Arthur's pale face grew stern from excess of emotion. He put one arm gently around the girl's slender waist. With the other hand under her quivering chin, he as gently compelled her to uplift her wan, woeful, piteous face, with its brightness all dimmed, its exquisite beauty like that of some colorless marble statue.

“Now tell me, little Blanche,” he said, in a tone of gentle firmness and tender command. “You are wringing my heart—”

“I shall have to wring it worse if I tell you,” Blanche sobbed. “Oh, Guardy ! It is about—about Guy !”

“Well, my child, what is it that is so terrible about Guy ?”

He waited with seeming calmness, yet with anxious intentness, for her reply. What terrible thing had she to tell him ?

For a few moments a dead silence reigned between them—a silence broken only by Blanche's sobs.

It seemed as if Blanche would have retracted at that last minute all she had said, and withheld from her guardian that which she had called him to her chamber to hear.

She wrung her hands anew, weeping pitifully.

"Oh, I cannot! I cannot!" she moaned. "You will hate me as the bearer of such ill tidings. I cannot tell you!"

A sudden flush leaped to Sir Arthur's cheeks. A sudden radiance glowed in his eyes.

"Is it—is it that you have ceased to love him?" he asked tremulously.

A like flush stained the pure whiteness of Blanche's cheeks. She drew a quick, gasping breath. A sudden confusion seized upon her.

"Oh, no, no!" she whispered, lowly and hesitatingly, as if she dared not keep silence.

"You love him, then? You love him still?"

The girl did not answer, but drooped her head slowly. Sir Arthur read in that action a shy assent to his question. The color faded from his face. For a few moments he was deathly still. Then he said, in a grave, pained voice:

"Speak, Blanche. You love Guy still. What is it, then, affects you so? Tell me at once!"

He waited for her to speak, in a gently compelling silence.

Blanche forced herself to be calm.

"I will tell you, Sir Arthur—even if you hate me for it!" she murmured brokenly. "I was sleepless last night. I lay awake for hours restless and nervous—thinking of that money in the library safe. And I

was afraid of burglars. At last—it must have been some time after midnight—I heard a step in the hall—”

“ Ah !”

“ I—I thought it might be a burglar. I was afraid they would murder you for the safe key. And I sprang up and threw on my dressing-gown, and hurried into the hall, intending to go to your room to waken you. I had hardly got out into the hall when I heard some one coming out of your room. I had only time to crouch down in the niche behind the bronze Crusader near my door when a man came out from your room. He had the key of the safe in his hand.”

Sir Arthur looked at Blanche with burning eyes.

The girl continued brokenly :

“ He—the man sat down in a hall chair for a little while. I crouched in the dark niche. Presently he went into Guy's room and came out with a light. He went down stairs and into the library. And I—I crept after him, thinking he might be walking in his sleep. But he was broad awake. He went up to the safe and opened it. I peered in at him through a crevice at the door. He took out the bag of gold, locked the safe, and tossed the key on the floor. Then he opened the window, and crept out on the terrace with his stolen money !”

“ You saw his face ?” demanded the Baronet with a strange calmness.

“ Yes, Sir Arthur.”

“ And you knew this man ?”

“ Yes, Sir Arthur. Oh, I knew him !”

“ Who was he ? Who was this midnight robber ?”

There was a brief, terrible silence. Then the girl said, in a piteous, broken voice :

“ He—he was Guy.”



CHAPTER XIII.

AN UNSEEN WITNESS.

The revelation of Blanche—that Lowder was the midnight thief who had robbed Sir Arthur Tressilian—proved, as the young girl had feared, a cruel shock to the Baronet. Notwithstanding Blanche's agitation and distress, and her reluctance to speak, Sir Arthur had not suspected the actual truth.

Now he averted his face from her, covering it with his hands.

The girl crept near to him, clinging to his hands in a mute sympathy, but she did not speak.

There was a little silence between the pair, but presently Sir Arthur said, in a broken voice :

“Oh, my boy ! My son ! My son ! I have thought him the soul of honor. How I have loved him ! I would have died for him ! And what is he ? A liar ! a thief !”

“Oh, Guardy ?” cried the young girl shuddering.

Sir Arthur uncovered his face and looked at his ward. His grandly handsome countenance was pale and very stern. In his dark eyes appeared an expression of desolation and anguish.

“My poor little Blanche !” he said, laying his hand caressingly upon her golden tresses. “And you love him still ? It is a strange thing—a woman's love surviving respect, esteem, everything !”

Blanche made a little gesture of dissent, but her guardian did not notice it. Had he read her heart aright, he would have seen that her grief was all for him, and not for her own disappointment. Had he known her better, he would have comprehended that Blanche could never love one whom she had ceased to respect.

"This is as hard for you as for me, Blanche," continued her guardian, in a sad and troubled voice, pitying the young girl's supposed anguish even in his own great sorrow. "Guy is not what he was. He had a grand and noble nature, whose very backbone was a love of truth. He hated a lie, whether of word or deed. Until his recent return from abroad, I would have staked my life upon his honor and truthfulness."

Blanche did not answer, but softly stroked the hand she held.

"Had another than you seen him perpetrate this robbery, Blanche," said her guardian slowly, "I should refuse it credence. And yet—and yet—I have found him untruthful, secretive, and strange. There was something odd in that affair of the foreigner yesterday. My son is a sealed book to me. He was with me in the library this morning when I discovered my loss. And he took pains to direct my suspicions against Purmton and Paxter, the most faithful servitors any man ever had. He might have spared himself this baseness of accusing the innocent!"

"What! he would have accused them of his own crime?" exclaimed Blanche, horrified at such a depth of baseness in the lover whom she had so lately deemed noble and good. "Oh, Sir Arthur!"

"I should not have told you this, Blanche. You had enough to bear before," said the Baronet compassionately. "The money was intended for him in another

shape. What could have tempted him to the robbery? What immediate and pressing need had he of two thousand pounds? And if he needed money, why did he not apply to me for it? Clearly he dreaded lest I should ask him why he wanted it."

Blanche was a dainty, childlike little creature in appearance, but under her golden tresses was hidden a clear, strong, womanly intellect. She pondered Sir Arthur's questions for several minutes, and then said:

"Did you not notice yesterday, Sir Arthur, that Guy seemed shocked, even terrified, on receiving that note from the foreigner, and which he said was a begging letter? Perhaps he had known the foreigner before. Perhaps the letter was a demand for money."

"Blanche, I believe you are right!" cried Sir Arthur, in a quick, startled voice. "But how could he owe the fellow so large a sum?"

"He may not have owed it all, Sir Arthur, but may have taken all to make the robbery seem the act of a burglar. No burglar, you know, would count out a certain sum and leave the rest. And as to owing him money," added Blanche, gently, "it might have been for a gaming debt."

"It only needs that supposition resolved into certainty to fill my cup of humiliation and sorrow to the brim. A gambler! A liar! A thief! And he is my son!"

Sir Arthur put from him the slender, clinging arms, and paced the floor with a quick, impatient tread.

"Blanche," he exclaimed, "I must know the truth—the whole truth—at once! I am going to send over to Ardleigh to see if the foreigner stopped there over night. If he did, our worst fears will receive confirmation. I shall quietly devote myself to studying out this matter. I do not wish Guy to know that I suspect him of the robbery. Therefore come down to luncheon

and dinner as usual, if you are able. I will keep you informed of my discoveries, if I make any."

He approached her, and kissed her forehead. Then he went out hastily, returning to the library.

After a brief self-communion, and as soon as he had regained an outward calmness, Sir Arthur rang his bell. On the appearance of a servant, the Baronet sent for Purmton.

When the butler entered the room, in obedience to the summons, the Baronet said quietly :

"Purmton, I have formed a theory in regard to last night's robbery, and I shall need your assistance. Did you see an odd-looking foreigner about the grounds yesterday?"

"A short, swarthy fellow, with little black eyes, and gold rings in his ears?" asked the butler eagerly. "I saw such a man in the garden yesterday talking to old Luke. He afterward brought a letter for Mr. Guy. He was an ill-looking fellow, Sir Arthur, and old Luke, when he came into the servant's hall to warm himself, said that the man asked many questions about the family, and wanted a place. Do you suspect the foreign man, Sir Arthur?"

"I suspect that he had something to do with the robbery, Purmton," replied the Baronet. "I want particularly to know if he slept at Ardleigh. I desire you to go over to the village at once, and make cautious inquiries in regard to him. And, Purmton, I desire you to be very secret and guarded. I do not wish any one—not even Mr. Guy—to know what direction my suspicions are taking."

"Very well, Sir Arthur," said the butler, a little mystified, yet persuaded that his employer was quite right in being so cautious. "I will obey you. And I will set out for Ardleigh directly."

After a few further directions from the Baronet, the butler withdrew. A few minutes later, Sir Arthur saw him riding down the avenue upon a stout little cob.

Purmton rode to Ardleigh, and dismounted within the small paved court of the Tressilian Arms. Giving his cob into the care of a stable lad, he lounged into the tap-room of the inn, pulled off his heavy gloves, and stood with his back to the fire, his hands under his coat tails.

As the hour was early—it was not yet ten o'clock—the tap-room had no occupant save the jolly landlord, whose ruddy, hanging cheeks and paunchy figure were an excellent advertisement of the cheer afforded at the Tressilian Arms to fortunate travellers.

“A fine morning, Mr. Purmton,” said the landlord respectfully, for the butler of Tressilian Court was a great personage at Ardleigh. “A little cold, to be sure, and a little dark and dull, but what does one expect at this season? Not summer weather surely. What will you have, Mr. Purmton? A pint of porter?”

“A pot of half-and-half,” answered Purmton.

The beverage thus demanded was speedily prepared. Purmton sipped it, and the landlord of the Tressilian Arms closed the inn door, stirred his fire, and prepared himself for a gossiping chat about Tressilian Court, the great place of the neighborhood.

“Sir Arthur well?” he inquired.

“Very well indeed.”

“They say that Mr. Guy and Miss Blanche are going to make a match,” observed the landlord. “I saw Mr. Guy riding past an hour or so ago. He went to the lawyer’s office. They can’t be drawing up the marriage settlements yet, Mr. Purmton?”

“Oh, no, not yet, Briggs,” said Purmton. “The wedding won’t come off till February. There ’ll be gay doings at the Court then. Sir Arthur means to

make a festival for the villagers, tenants and all ; though to be sure, the villagers are mostly Sir Arthur's tenants."

The jolly, round landlord rubbed his hands delightedly.

"I am glad to hear it," he exclaimed. "Mr. Guy will have a lovely and beautiful bride—none lovelier or prettier in the shire."

"How's trade?" asked Purmton, having beaten about the bush sufficiently, and coming gradually to the point of his visit. "Many strangers at the inn?"

"Not one, Mr. Purmton. People stay at home mostly at Christmas time, and we are drawing near the holidays. Business is a little dull. We haven't had a stranger to stop over night this week, except a commercial traveller from Gloucester, and—yes—a bagman bound up Chester way."

The butler had gained the information he wanted, and declared he must go. And having ordered a supply of ale for the servants' hall at the Court, he strolled out into the quiet, narrow street.

"The foreign fellow may have gone to the Harvest Home," he thought. "Poor people, tramps, and the like, mostly go to the Harvest Home."

He walked leisurely down the narrow street until he came to the small inn known as the Harvest Home. He had the intention of entering its tap-room, but changed his mind as he beheld, leaning carelessly against the glazed door, a short, black pipe in his mouth, the very man of whose whereabouts he was seeking information, Jacopo Palestro!

"Yes, that's the fellow, sure enough," thought the butler, with a keen, though furtive glance at the scrivener. "He has gold ear-rings, a swarthy skin, small black eyes. He has stayed at the Harvest Home

since yesterday. No doubt he is the burglar, or one of the burglars, who robbed Sir Arthur last night."

He walked on slowly, making an errand into a cobbler's shop a few doors below. And presently he repassed the Harvest Home, a parcel in his hand, and a most unconcerned expression on his countenance.

He returned to the Tressilian Arms, mounted his horse, and rode back to the Court.

Sir Arthur was still in his library when Purmton entered the room. The butler made his report. The Baronet did not seem at all surprised to learn that Palestro was still at Ardleigh.

"His presence at the village confirms my theory," said Sir Arthur wearily. "Keep a still tongue, Purmton. I want nothing said concerning my loss."

He dismissed his servitor, and the mask of calmness fell from his worn and troubled face when he found himself again alone.

"Blanche was right," he said to himself. "Guy must owe this foreigner a gaming debt. He cannot owe him so large a sum on any legitimate debt. The man followed him to England, urging his claims to be paid. Guy dared not resist his demands, knowing my horror of the vice of gaming, and fearing the facts might come to my hearing. So to escape my just anger, he has plunged into a crime! What am I to do in these premises?"

The question was full of difficulties.

"I might call Guy here on his return, and tell him what Blanche has told me," he thought. "But would that be the wisest course? The truth is, my son is daily becoming a mystery to me. I think I will let this matter run its course, and watch him. It is quite clear to me that he committed the robbery unaided. Blanche heard him return to his room a few minutes after his

egress by the library window. That fact, coupled with the Italian's continued presence at Ardleigh, clearly proves that he has not yet paid the foreigner the money. He has probably concealed it in the park, and will pay it to-night. Guy would not visit the ill-looking Italian at the Harvest Home. They will meet in the park to-night. Their meeting shall have a witness. My duty to Blanche and myself demand that I shall know fully the character of my son who is to be her husband."

Sir Arthur had scarcely arrived at this resolution, when Lowder was heard cantering up the drive. A little later he entered the library, flushed with exercise and the chill air. His manner was jaunty and self-possessed.

"I suppose you haven't found any clue to the robber yet, father?" he said, going up to the grate and warming his hands. "Have you telegraphed to Scotland Yard for a detective?"

"No, Guy. I have decided not to do so."

A look of relief not unmarked by the Baronet, passed over Lowder's face. He laughed gayly.

"Then you have given it up as lost indeed?" he questioned. "You have concluded to pocket the loss, eh? Perhaps you are wise. The person who stole the money would take every precaution to hide it. And a deed committed in the dead of night must necessarily have been without a witness."

"There was one Witness," said Sir Arthur, solemnly. "The thief could not evade the gaze of the All-seeing Eye!"

Lowder shifted his position uneasily, and laughed again, this time more constrainedly.

"Oh, of course," he said. "But about your business, father. I went over to Ardleigh, found the lawyer's

office, and executed your errand. I was there when Mr. Roy came in. The lawyer, to whom I had communicated the fact of the robbery, made some excuses in your behalf to account for your failure to meet your engagement with Roy. The farmer was in a huff at once, and, in a high and mighty tone, said he had received another offer for his farm quite as good as yours, and should sell at once to the new applicant. And with that he went out, paying no heed to the remonstrances of the lawyer or myself."

"It was as well," said the Baronet quietly. "I had decided, while you were absent, that I would not buy the farm."

Lowder shot a quick, keen glance at the Baronet.

"Why," he exclaimed, in surprise, "your loss of two thousand pounds has not crippled you, I hope?"

Sir Arthur's face flushed with a sense of annoyance, as he answered:

"No; my resources are not crippled by this loss, Guy, but I have relinquished the idea of buying the Roy farm. Gildethorpe is a pretty little property in itself, and yields a neat income."

"Well, one need not sigh for the Roy farm who is to inherit Tressilian Court," said Lowder, smiling complacently. "The future owner of this grand estate with its kingly revenues need not sigh for a single farm. And so I told the lawyer, who quite agreed with me."

The ill-taste of Lowder, in thus calculating upon the benefits he should derive from the demise of the Baronet, quite inspired the latter with a sense of disgust. He moved impatiently in his chair, and sharp words of reproof and accusation trembled on his tongue.

Controlling himself, however, he turned to his desk, and busied himself in glancing over its contents. Lowder, noticing his uncommunicativeness, and ascribing it

to chagrin at his loss, soon excused himself, and went to his room.

The family met at the luncheon table, as usual. Blanche looked wearied and wan, but her beauty was undimmed, and Lowder made her a graceful compliment upon it. Sir Arthur was very grave, but Lowder, suspecting nothing of the undercurrent that threatened to swamp him, was smiling and pleasant, full of stories and reminiscences, that at another time would have delighted his auditors.

Soon after the luncheon, the Egerton family called, and other visitors arrived after their departure. The afternoon thus passed without the constraint Blanche had feared. About five o'clock the young girl—the visitors having all departed—went up to her room to dress, and did not make her reappearance until summoned to dinner.

She entered the dining-room, where Sir Arthur and Lowder awaited her, attired in a robe of pale blue silk, with filmy laces, and sapphire jewels contrasting finely with the purity and delicacy of her complexion. She was unusually quiet and thoughtful, but the slight shadow did not sit ill upon a brow as sunny as hers. She took her seat at the table, and exerted herself to cheer her guardian, whose gloom was deepening with every moment. The high-minded, great-souled Baronet could have borne any grief better than this discovery of the utter unworthiness of the man he believed to be his son.

After dinner, Sir Arthur gave his arm to Blanche and conducted her to the drawing-room. The evening passed much as usual, save that the Baronet seemed absorbed in his copy of the *London Times*, and scarcely looked up from it. Blanche played upon the piano, and sang, Lowder accompanying her with his voice. When

tired of music, Lowder conducted the girl to an easy-chair under the great chandelier, and sat upon a low hassock at her feet, and read Tennyson to her in a tender voice, and with glances warm with love and admiration.

And the girl listened and smiled, while her heart grew sick within her.

How very far from her glorious ideal hero was this double-dealer, this falsifier, this traitor to his father, this midnight robber ! There was a revulsion going on in her soul of which no one, not even herself, dreamed.

At nine o'clock, as was the custom at the Court, tea was brought in upon a tray. At ten o'clock, Blanche retired for the night.

Sir Arthur and Lowder were thus left together. Evidently the latter had no fancy for a *tête-à-tête* with the gloomy, sad-eyed Baronet, and arose, yawning.

"I believe I am sleepy," he observed, "and I will go to bed. Good-night, father."

He went out, ascending the stairs to his own room. Sir Arthur, going into the hall, heard him enter his chamber and double lock his door.

"That is only a ruse," he thought. "I believe he means to meet that foreigner in the park. I will meet his stratagem with stratagem."

He covered the drawing-room fire, having first raked the coals apart ; then extinguished the lights and secured the doors. Then he went up to his own room. A minute later he glided down the stairs again. His great-coat and seal-skin cap hung upon the branching antlers. He donned them, muffling himself thoroughly, and made his way out by a side door upon the lawn.

The night was cold and gloomy. A few stars were shining, but their splendor was dulled. A chill wind swept up from the river. But Sir Arthur had no thought

of Nature in this hour of trouble and anxiety. He crossed the lawn hurriedly, keeping in the deeper shadows of the trees, and entered the park.

Here, in a spot from which he could command a view of the eastern façade of the Court, he waited, with feelings only a father similarly situated can know.

The minutes passed. The clock in the old clock tower, one of the features of Tressilian Court, struck the half hour after ten. The sound was yet echoing upon the wintry night air, when the side door under a quaint carved porch—the same door by which Sir Arthur had left the court—slowly opened, and a muffled figure came out of the dwelling.

Sir Arthur, bending forward and watching eagerly, recognized this figure as that of his supposed son.

“My theory is being confirmed,” he murmured. “Oh Guy! my son!”

Unconscious of this anguished scrutiny, Lowder crossed the lawn fleetly, and approached the park.

As he came near, a figure started out to meet him—the figure of Palestro.

“You are in good time, Milord, Sir Tresolino!” Sir Arthur heard the Italian say, in a mocking voice. “Ah, you did not dare defy Palestro!”

“Back there!” commanded Lowder, in suppressed tones. “Would you be seen from the Court? Do you want to ruin everything? Yes, I am here, Palestro. And I have the two thousand pounds you demand, all ready for you!”

As he spoke, the usurper took the arm of the Italian, and the two men moved through the shadows toward the very tree behind which the Baronet was hiding.



CHAPTER XIV.

STILL ON THE WING.

Olla Rymple, Guy Tressilian and the Popleys, on their arrival at the Victoria Hotel, to which they made their way on their arrival at the Victoria station in London, were shown up to pleasant rooms upon the third floor, and opening off the same corridor.

The little party separated, retiring to their several rooms, and all were soon asleep. At eight o'clock on the following morning, Guy Tressilian found his way to the private sitting-room of Olla, where his young protectress was awaiting him.

She came forward to greet him, extending both her hands. Guy was looking wan, feverish and nearly exhausted. It was plainly apparent that something must be done for him without delay.

"You need rest, Jasper," exclaimed Olla anxiously.

"I need a physician or surgeon more still," returned Tressilian, putting his hand to his head. "My wound pains me. I feel quite ill, Olla. Pray Heaven I am not going to be ill in a London hotel. Every noise in

the halls jars upon my sensitive nerves. The sound of the street cabs almost maddens me."

"He should be got away from London at once," declared Mrs. Popley. "Or at least into a private house."

Olla conducted Tressilian to a couch, and gently compelled him to recline upon it. She had ordered breakfast, and now sat down to write a note to her friends the Pughs at their town address. She detailed the friendlessness of her position, her pressing need of aid for Tressilian, and dispatched the missive at once by Popley, who had already breakfasted.

He returned soon after Olla had finished her breakfast, Tressilian declining food.

"Well?" cried the young girl, turning an anxious face upon her faithful servant.

Popley replied by returning the note she had given him for delivery, and said:

"The Pughs are not in town, Miss Olla. They have gone up into Yorkshire to spend the Christmas holidays their housekeeper said. They will not return until the middle of January."

A look of absolute despair for a moment convulsed Olla's bright face.

"Gone!" she exclaimed, tossing the note upon the grate. "What am I to do? I have not another friend in London. I don't know a person in all England upon whose friendship I can confidently rely in this hour of need. I led such a secluded life in Berks with my guardian, that I made no intimate friends. This is the darkest hour of my life!"

"Don't say so, Miss Olla," pleaded Popley. "Or, if you do, remember that the darkest hour comes just before the dawn, as the old saying goes."

"Oh, if the dawn would only break now!" and the

girl's passionate young voice trembled. "*He* ill in a London hotel," and she pointed at poor Tressilian, who lay back on his lounge with shut eyes, "and I liable to be captured at any moment as a runaway ward! To whom can I appeal against Mr. Gower? I am alone, friendless, helpless! I don't know to whom to apply for help. And if Mr. Gower were to capture me he would take me away, and Jasper would be sent to a hospital. Oh, I cannot—cannot bear it!"

"My poor Miss Olla," said Mrs. Popley, in her motherly voice, "you are indeed in a great strait. It is plain that Mr. Lowder must be taken out of this noise as speedily as possible. It is equally plain that you must have a quiet hiding-place, until you can communicate with the Pughs. Why should you not go to Bleak Top, up in Northumberland? It is hidden among the Cheviot Hills, is lonely, and belongs to you. It is a mere shooting-box and the small estate attached to it is a mere pasturage for sheep. It is a property so unproductive that Mr. Gower has never spoken of it. I dare say he has forgotten that such a place exists!"

"He may not even know that I own it," said Olla, her dark, small face lighting up with a bright glow. "He hasn't the care of my property. We will go to Bleak Top, nurse. That is settled. And now, Popley, I want you to find me one of the best surgeons in London. One of the best is Sir Windham Winn. Go for him, Popley, and if he is in town, have him return with you. Represent the case as requiring immediate attention."

Popley departed on his errand, and Olla returned to Tressilian's side. He opened his eyes at her approach, and smiled gently, and held out his hand to her.

"Do you feel worse, Jasper?" the girl asked.

"A little," Tressilian answered, in a low, faint voice.

"My wound pains me so. And the noise—ah, the noise grates upon my brain ! It is terrible !"

"You shall not bear it long, Jasper," said Olla, repressing her tears bravely. "Keep up your courage, I am going to take you up into the north, into the quiet, cool country. You will get well there, Jasper. I have sent for the great surgeon, Sir Windham Winn. He will cure you, only do not give way now, at the very last."

Tressilian pressed the small warm hand in his, and again closed his eyes.

An hour passed thus. A second hour followed. The time passed slowly to impatient little Olla, although she studied the fair, handsome face of her charge, feature by feature, and felt his pulse, and listened now and then uneasily to his breathing.

About ten o'clock Sir Windham Winn, the celebrated surgeon, made his appearance with Popley.

Olla gently unclasped her hand from that of Tressilian, and came forward to meet the surgeon.

He was a tall, well-made, portly Welsh gentleman, with a fair and ruddy face, and a prompt air of business, which declared as plainly as words could have done that "time is money." There was that in his expression, however, and in the glances of his pale blue eyes, that inspired Olla not only with confidence in his skill, but also enlisted her friendship.

"I have sent for you, Sir Windham," she said, with a glance at Tressilian, whose eyes were still shut, and who looked as if sleeping, "in behalf of a friend of mine—a gentlemau who is travelling with our party—who is very ill. He met with a terrible accident in Sicily, some weeks since, and received an injury to his skull which has paralyzed his brain. Be seated, and I will give you the story at length."

The narrative thus promised being necessary to a full comprehension of the patient's injury and condition, Sir Windham Winn removed his greatcoat and gloves, and took a seat by the fire, his gaze wandering from Olla to Tressilian and back again.

Olla told her story clearly and concisely, dealing with Tressilian's adventures almost exclusively, and saying nothing about her guardian, or her own friendlessness.

The surgeon listened with grave attentiveness. When Olla described the surgical operation performed upon Guy by the brigand 'Doctor,' Sir Windham smiled, and said :

"Pardon me, my dear young lady, but did you think that the human brain, when out of order, might be repaired like some worn-out clock? It is a mercy that your friend was not rendered an imbecile indeed!"

It was evident that the great surgeon's opinion of the brigand "Doctor's" merits fell far short of the "Doctor's" opinion of himself.

With a flushing cheek, Olla continued her story, reciting, in conclusion, Tressilian's sensitiveness in regard to the hotel and street noises, and her desire to remove him to a secluded country house.

The surgeon arose, went to the couch, and examined Tressilian's pulse. Guy looked at him with a vague and uncertain gaze, but manifested no surprise at his presence.

With a grave countenance, Sir Windham gently removed the bandages upon Tressilian's skull. The gaping, unhealed wound was displayed in all its horror. Popley was at hand, ready to act as assistant, should his services be required. Olla and Mrs. Popley stood at the foot of the couch.

After a somewhat protracted investigation of Guy's injury, Sir Windham ordered Popley to restore the

bandages to their former place, and addressed himself to Olla.

"The young man's injury is very severe, Madam," he said. "I wonder that he survived it. The bungling operation that was performed upon it in Italy has not greatly improved matters. The wound is in a serious state of inflammation. The first thing to be had is absolute quiet. How far distant is your country-house?"

"It is in Northumberland."

"Humph! He will have to be moved under the influence of opiates. And the sooner the better. He would not live a week in this turmoil. The operation will have to be deferred until after his removal. It will be one attended by much danger, and if I undertake it, I must have my patient in a place where attendant circumstances will not hinder his recovery."

"But you will undertake it, Sir Windham, will you not?" cried Olla, detecting reluctance in his tones. "I will pay you any sum you may charge—a hundred pounds—a hundred and fifty pounds—more!" and she drew out her stuffed little portmonnaie whose plethoric condition might have reassured a more sordid man than Sir Windham Winn. "Name your own price, Sir Windham, and here is a retaining fee."

She counted out ten golden sovereigns, and pressed them upon the surprised surgeon. He accepted them, putting them in his pocket, and was the regularly engaged medical attendant of Tressilian.

"Will you not go with us to the north?" asked Olla, her quick brain devising instantly a plan of action. "The house is in the charge of an old couple who are permitted to occupy the servant's rooms rent free, on condition of caring for the place. I will send Popley on in advance to prepare rooms for use, and we could fol-

low by the evening train, if you would kindly go with us."

"Where is the house, did you say?"

"Among the Cheviot Hills. It is called Bleak Top. It belongs to me. And I—I have neglected to introduce myself, Sir Windham. I am Miss Olla Rymple, orphan daughter of the late Honorable James Rymple, and more lately a ward of Lady Fedora Welby, my mother's friend. Circumstances have conspired to throw me upon the world; yet I am not alone, for these faithful servants of mine have guarded me from my childhood."

"And you are the daughter of James Rymple!" exclaimed the surgeon, in tones of interest. "I knew your father, my dear young lady. He was a wild, generous, noble fellow. He died young. I did not know that he had left a daughter."

He extended his hand to Olla, adding:

"I will befriend you to the best of my ability, my dear Miss Rymple. I should like to be a friend to poor Rymple's orphan daughter. I will accompany you to Northumberland by the night train. You had better send your servant on at once, with orders to have the rooms well warmed and aired. Even a journey to Northumberland would not fatigue your friend more than a night here."

Olla sent Popley out to inquire the hour of departure of the next train north. By the time he returned, Olla and Sir Windham were excellent friends, and all the details of the northern journey had been arranged.

Popley announced that he had just time to catch the north-bound train. His young mistress placed a sufficient sum of money in his hands, ordered him to take a supply of provisions on to Bleak Top from Alnwick,

and Mrs. Popley then added a few housewifely injunctions, in the midst of which Popley took his departure.

A sort of lethargy was creeping over Tressilian, and the surgeon administered to him some necessary medicine, acting as a sedative upon the excited and inflamed brain, and gave directions in regard to cooling exterior applications. He then went away.

All day long Tressilian lay in a sort of stupor. Now and then he would arouse himself at the sound of Olla's voice, but only to fall feebly back again into a deeper lethargy.

It may be imagined that this lonely watch by his side was not inspiriting to the poor young girl troubled upon so many accounts.

The day drew near its close. Before lamplight, Sir Windham Winn returned, equipped for his long, cold journey. From the moment of his arrival, he took charge of his patient. He fed him a nourishing broth, administered a new medicine which had the effect of giving Tressilian a factitious strength, and he put upon him his greatcoat and outer wrappings.

Olla and Mrs. Popley made themselves ready, and the four, Tressilian leaning upon Sir Windham's arm, descended to the waiting cab. A light snow was falling, melting on the sloppy pavements. The street lamps were lighted. The little party entered the cab, and were driven to the Great Northern Railway Terminus. And as the sullen, wintry night deepened, they entered a railway coach of the Great Northern line, and started on their way to the bleak Cheviot Hills.



CHAPTER XV.

BLEAK TOP.

One of the loneliest and dreariest of the Cheviot Hills in Northumberland is the one known as Bleak Mountain. It is grim and bare, save for patches of stunted pines and Northern firs and an extensive planted shrubbery.

At the foot of Bleak Mountain clusters the small hamlet of Gloamvale, already described to the reader, upon the occasion of Jasper Lowder's visit to the neighborhood.

Upon the flank of the mountain, and a mile distant from the village, is situated the lonely old farm-house belonging to Guy Tressilian, in whose dreary solitude Jasper Lowder had immured his wronged young wife and her boy.

The road, rough and rugged, winds up from Gloamvale across the moors, past Gloam Fell, and yet more steeply up the mountain side to the very summit of the elevation.

And upon this lonely summit, like a crown, stands the solitary mansion known as Bleak Top. It is an old stone building, of rambling proportions, two stories in height, and having a tall, steep, overhanging roof orna-

mented thickly with projecting dormer windows ; its chimneys standing from the roof in clusters. The house is plainly built, but its appearance is hospitable in the extreme.

It had been a favorite shooting-box with the late Mr. Rymple, the father of Olla, but had been unused since his day. The house had been for years under the care of an elderly woman and her grandson.

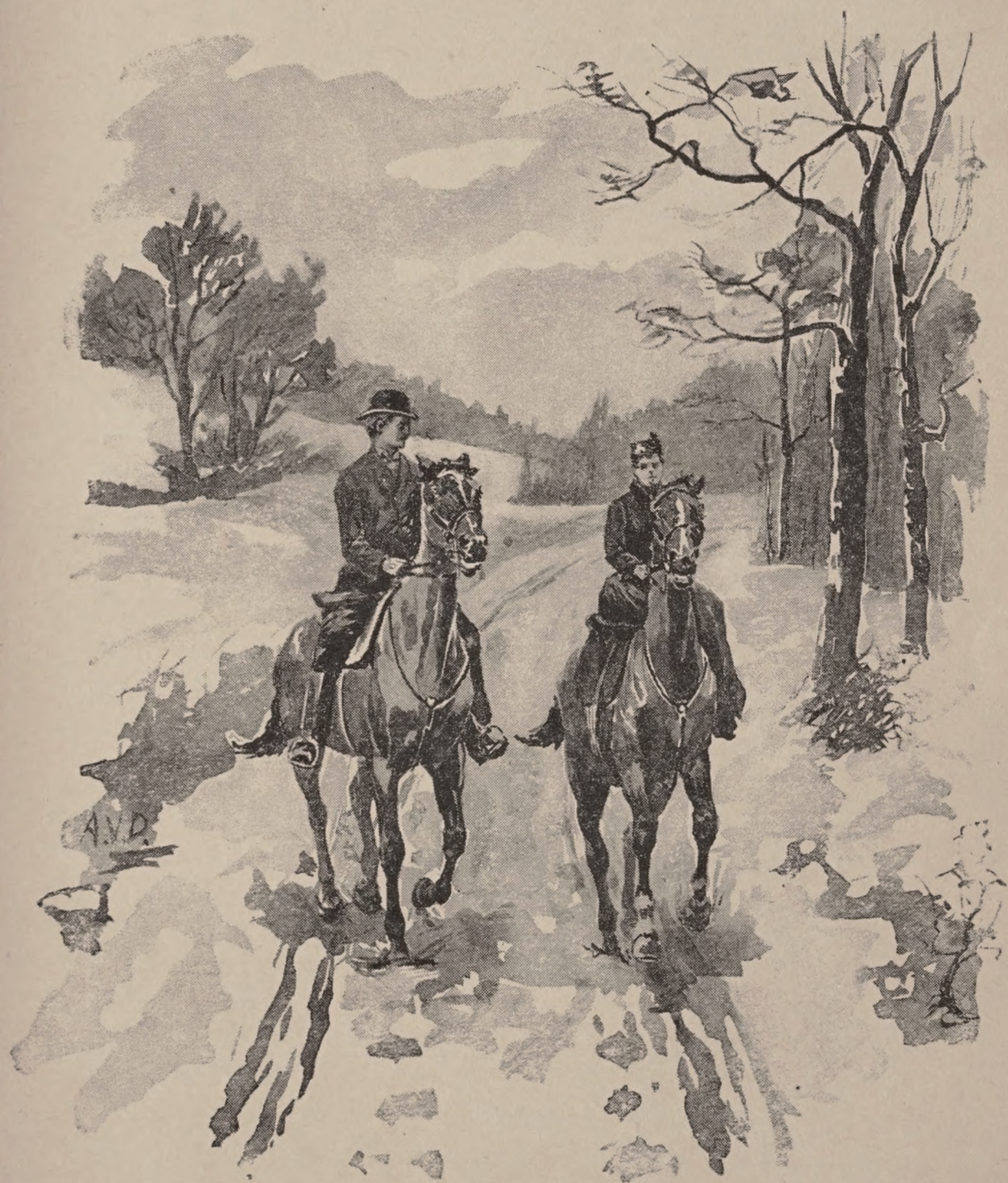
In the rear of the house, at a little distance, is a group of out-buildings, including stable, cow-house and hen-house. These complete the appendages of the little estate, which comprises nearly the whole mountain. Gloam Fell is the only house besides Bleak Top on the mountain, and Gloam Fell is more than a mile distant.

The snow was falling fitfully, and the wind was sweeping the rugged face of the country in chill gusts, upon the wild December morning when Olla Rymple and Mrs. Popley, Sir Windham Winn and Guy Tressilian alighted from the train at Alnwick, on their way to Bleak Top.

As Jasper Lowder had done, on the occasion of his visit to the same place, they proceeded first of all to a hotel, where they procured a hot breakfast and ordered a post-chaise to be got ready immediately.

Tressilian under the influence of medicine, was able to walk, leaning upon the great surgeon's arm. He was looking very ill. His face was pale as death, save in the cheeks, where a hectic flush burned fitfully. He had slept well during the night, thanks to narcotics, and seemed to be little worse for the noise and jar of the railway, but it was evident that the constant excitement in which he had lived since leaving Sicily was swiftly wearing him out.

"We must get him in bed as soon as possible," said Sir Windham gravely, after having dressed his patient's



THEY RODE DOWN THE MOUNTAIN SIDE.—See Chapter XXIV.

wound and given him a suitable breakfast. "He cannot bear up much longer. His wound is in a highly inflamed state. The operation should be performed to-day, if we hope to have it successful."

At this juncture the post-chaise was announced, and the party, wrapping themselves well against the piercing cold, descended to take their places in it. A supply of tin hot-water cans and woolen lap robes promised to mitigate the coldness of the weather. The curtains of the vehicle were closely buttoned down to keep out the gusty wind, and the driver, enveloped in a cloak of many capes and muffled closely about the head and ears, mounted to his box.

The journey proved a hard one. Despite their precautions, the wind crept into the vehicle, and the cold came with it. Tressilian sank into a lethargy and scarcely moved, and did not once speak during the drive. Sir Windham was loud in his complaints; Mrs. Popley shivered continually; and even patient, brave little Olla found the exposure almost beyond endurance.

At Alnham they stopped to warm and refresh themselves. Sir Windham ordered hot, spiced drinks for all except his patient. The tin cans were refilled with hot water, and the travellers resumed their journey.

Soon after eleven o'clock the post-chaise rattled up the narrow, stony, single street of Gloamvale. Passing through the hamlet without stopping, the party pushed on for Bleak Top.

The wide and windy commons were covered with a foot of snow, and the flakes were still falling. Olla wiped off the wet window-pane with her handkerchief, and pressing her face against the glass, looked out upon the dreary scenery.

As the vehicle labored heavily past the old farmhouse of Gloam Fell the young girl noticed the smoke

from its chimneys, and saw at the parlor window a patient, girlish face beside that of a rosy, laughing baby.

Hester Lowder and her boy were watching the snowflakes and the gambols of the wind.

"Has Gloam Fell a new tenant, I wonder?" exclaimed Olla, at once interested in the young mother and her child. "Old Mrs. Tooker has no children. I know all about the tenants at Gloam Fell, for I came often to Bleak Top in my early childhood. Gloam Fell is the only house on the mountain besides Bleak Top, and it is owned by a Tressilian, one of the Tressilians of Tressilian Court, in Gloucestershire."

"Is it indeed?" said Sir Windham. "Sir Arthur Tressilian's son and heir has lately returned from a long residence abroad, I hear. I know Sir Arthur well. It is a fine old family, that of the Tressilians."

The concluding mile of travel seemed harder than all that had preceded it. The road was steep and rugged, the snow was piled at various points in drifts, and in exposed places the wind assailed them so fiercely that the horses could with difficulty maintain their footing.

But at last they turned into the home grounds of Bleak Top through wide, open gates, and proceeded by a drive between two long rows of firs toward the gray old stone house. As they reached the porch the house door was flung open, and Popley came running down the steps to give them welcome.

"I did not think you would venture further than Alnwick to-day, Miss Olla," exclaimed the faithful fellow, opening the chaise door. "The weather is terrible; and the prospect is that it will be still worse."

He gave his hand to his young mistress, who sprang lightly out. Mrs. Popley followed more slowly. Then

came Sir Windham Winn, who had succeeded in arousing Tressilian from his stupor, and who now gave his patient his arm and led him up the steps.

Olla hurried on in advance, but paused at the threshold to say :

“Popley, take the horses around to the stable, and see that they are well cared for. Then take the driver into the kitchen and give him the best of food and drink that the house affords. He will remain at Bleak Top till to-morrow.”

Popley obeyed, mounting the box beside the well-pleased driver, and hurried the horses to the stable.

Olla opened the house door, and entered a long, well-lighted hall, whose bare floor was finely polished, and which was warmed by a great wood fire.

Off this hall opened a drawing room, into which Olla led her guests, while Mrs. Popley set out to discover the guardian of the house and her grandson.

The drawing-room comprised two snug apartments, with folding doors between. These doors were now opened, throwing the two rooms into one. In each room, upon a broad and cleanly hearth, a genial wood fire was burning. The walls of the double-room were low, and wainscoted to the ceiling. The windows were plentiful, though narrow, and set in a diamond-shaped lattice. The curtains were of white muslin, freshly washed and looped up with red ribbons. The carpet was faded, but in excellent repair. The furniture, that morning released from swaddling clothes of brown holland, in which it had been invested for years, looked fresh and almost new, its upholstery of green reps being unfaded. The room was light, warm and pleasant, a very haven of refuge to the cold and wind-beaten travellers.

Sir Windham Winn employed himself in removing

his own and Tressilian's wrappings. Olla tossed off her hat and jacket, and set out to find Mrs. Popley and the old care-taker of the house.

Crossing the great, warm, draughty hall, and traversing a cozy dining-room, Olla found herself at the door of the housekeeper's room. Opening this door, she entered the room. Mrs. Popley and the housekeeper were standing before a fire, in earnest conversation, but both came forward at the entrance of the young mistress of Bleak Top, the housekeeper courtesying profoundly.

She was an elderly woman, tall and gaunt, but with a pleasant, honest face. Her name was Mrs. Kipp, and, in his day, her husband had been butler in the household of Olla's father. Upon the death of Kipp, the widow had been given a home in this bleak region and here she had since lived with her grandson.

"You are welcome to Bleak Top, Miss Olla," she exclaimed. "Ah, you have grown since I saw you last, my bonny young lady. This is no season to enjoy the mountain air. It is dreary here on the border in the winter time, but we'll try to make the old house pleasant to you, Miss Olla."

"I have not come here for enjoyment, Mrs. Kipp, but for safety," said Olla, with a winning smile, as she extended her hand. "I want you and your grandson to remain under wages. Mrs. Popley will tell you why I came. And now I want you to show me the guest-chambers. We have brought an invalid with us, and it will be necessary to get him to bed at once."

Mrs. Kipp had already heard something of Tressilian from Popley, and now hastened to conduct her young mistress through the dwelling.

She led her back to the main hall, Mrs. Popley following, and to the stair-case hall. They ascended to

the upper story. Here a long, well-lighted corridor, through which draughts of wind were skurrying, divided the floor. Upon either side, chambers opened.

At their left were three bedrooms communicating. All these were pleasantly warmed. One of them had been arranged by Popley for the use of Tressilian, a second for Sir Windham Winn, who would remain one night at Bleak Top, and the third was intended for the occupancy of Popley himself, who intended to constitute himself Tressilian's nurse and valet.

The rooms prepared for Tressilian and the great surgeon were fitted up with fresh curtains, fresh and well-aired bed linen, lounges and easy-chairs. They were very inviting.

Olla was examining them when she heard Popley in the lower hall, and she exclaimed :

"I will have Mr. Lowder brought up immediately, Mrs. Kipp, and will then look at my own room. Where is your grandson?"

"At the stable, Miss Olla. He went out to help take care of the beasts."

Bidding the two women await her return, Olla ran down stairs and announced to the surgeon that Tressilian's room was ready. Guy was lying upon a sofa, his strength quite gone. Sir Windham endeavored to arouse him, but the lethargy enthralling him was too deep to be easily broken.

"We shall have to carry him up between us, Popley," said the surgeon, with a grave look in his eyes.

Popley obeyed Sir Windham's directions, and, with the surgeon's aid, carried Tressilian to the chamber that had been prepared for him. The women retired into the hall, and Sir Windham went into his own room, while Popley undressed the invalid and put him to bed.

"These are your rooms and Mrs. Popley's, Miss Olla," said Mrs. Kipp, throwing open the door of the chamber opposite Tressilian's. "And now if you will excuse me, I will go down and see to the dinner. It will be served in fifteen minutes, as Mr. Popley ordered."

She withdrew, and Olla entered the chamber assigned her. They were three in number, connecting. The third had been fitted up for Mrs. Popley. The others comprised a bedroom and dressing-room, and it was evident that Popley had expended his choicest skill in fitting them up in a manner suitable for his young mistress. The great brass fire-dogs, supporting burning logs, were burnished to a superlative degree of brightness. A hearth-rug, rescued on the previous day from a shroud of sacking, lay before the hearth like a bed of glowing flowers. The bed, a high and antique four-poster, was draped in snowy sheets and spread, and white curtains hung at the windows. A lounge and an arm-chair added a look of delicious comfort to the whole.

"Ah, this is pleasant!" exclaimed Olla delightedly. "How home-like it all looks! And how many fires there are in the house!"

"Yes, Miss Olla. Mrs. Kipp was saying to me that the fires have been burning in every room since Jim came," answered Mrs. Popley. "The rooms were colder than Iceland, and damp too. And the house is draughty as a barn. The roof leaks, and there's an inch of snow in spots on the attic floor. Mrs. Kipp, her grandson Kit, and my son, were up nearly all last night, putting things to rights. The carpets were sewed up in sacking, and the furniture was done up in bags. Mrs. Kipp would have met you at the door this morning, but that

she had to see to the dinner, and Kit was too bashful to show himself."

Olla investigated her rooms, and made her toilet by brushing her hair and dress, and bathing her wind-burned face. She then descended to the drawing-room, where she was soon joined by Sir Windham Winn, who had freshly attired himself.

"I know this house very well, Miss Olla," he observed. "I came here twenty years ago with a shooting party, by invitation of your father. This was a famous shooting-box in those days."

At this juncture Popley announced dinner. Sir Windham gave Olla his arm and conducted her out to the dining-room, where a little round table had been laid with covers for two. The table-cloth was fine and white, the silver burnished, the china and glass clear as crystal; while, best of all, there were roasted game birds, fine bread, vegetables, omelettes and other dainty edibles, supplemented with a bottle of crusty port and a decanter of sherry.

Popley waited upon the table, assisted by Christopher Kipp, a tall, sturdy, well-made young fellow, who seemed afflicted with an unconquerable bashfulness.

With the dessert of apple-tart and oranges, coffee was brought in. Sir Windham and Olla, left to themselves, talked long and earnestly, and Olla told her story, all her hopes, fears and perils, to the great surgeon, whose interest in her became deeply excited.

"You think it possible that Mr. Gower does not know that you own Bleak Top?" Sir Windham inquired.

"He has never spoken of it, Sir Windham. He has not charge of my property, as I was left to the guardianship of a lady—the lady who became his wife. It was she who consigned me to his care. The land belonging to Bleak Top has been leased for many years. The

house could not be let, and has been left in charge of Mrs. Kipp. I am quite sure that Mr. Gower does not even know of the existence of Bleak Top."

"It will be easy for him to obtain an inventory of your property," observed the surgeon thoughtfully. "The bad weather will be a defence to you, in case he succeeds in getting upon your track. I think you will be safe here for the present. You may depend upon my friendship and assistance should you need them, Miss Olla. Should Mr. Gower appear here and offer to molest you, send to Alnwick and telegraph to me at once. I will come at your call. I shall return to town to-morrow in any case, having patients to visit. I will consult a first-class lawyer, and see what steps are necessary to effect your release from the guardianship of Gower."

Olla thanked Sir Windham warmly, and they continued their discussion of the matter. A little later the surgeon went up to his patient, who had remained in charge of Popley. Tressilian was still in a stupor, his eyes closed, his breathing low and uneven. It seemed as if his lamp of life were burning dimly. Sir Windham felt his pulse. It beat faintly and irregularly.

The surgeon issued a few directions to Popley, who darkened the room, lighted candles, and proceeded to loosen the bandages covering Tressilian's wound.

After a long and close examination of the gaping hurt, Sir Windham said briefly :

"Lock the door. We must go to work at once !"

Popley hastened to obey, locking the door.

Olla, in her own chamber opposite, heard the clicking of bolts, and turned pale. She comprehended that the hour had come which should decide the fate of Tressilian—whether he should live or die : whether he should be an imbecile, or in full possession of his intellect. Wrapping a shawl about her head and shoulders, she

left her warm room and crept out into the cold, draughty hall, taking up her station near the door of Tressilian's room, her soul convulsed with an insupportable anxiety.

How slowly the minutes passed ! She could hear, now and then, the low tones of the surgeon addressing Popley. She could hear a sound occasionally, as of Popley moving across the chamber. But for these a dead silence reigned—a silence that might be of death.

The minutes lengthened into hours. The short December afternoon drew near its close. The wind rushed past the lonely old house of Bleak Top, rattling shutters, slamming doors, and tearing through the trees like some screaming demon. A strong, chill draught crept through the halls and corridors of the exposed dwelling. The glow of Olla's great wood fire reflected a red light against the opposite wall of her dressing-room, and stole genially out into the corridor, where the girl sat like a statue, all her faculties concentrated in the one of listening.

The shadows were clustering thickly in the lonely hall, and the time was the gray, chill twilight, when a sound came from the sick-room that nearly froze the blood in the young listener's veins.

It was a low, wild moan, a wail of unutterable sadness—the quick, startled cry of one in the extremity of bodily suffering.

“He is dying !” breathed the girl, in a hushed whisper. “Dying ! Oh, God help him !”

She arose and tottered to the wide window at the end of the hall. She sat down upon the broad window-seat, where the snow lay thickly as it had drifted in through the crevices of the window sash. Pressing her face closely against the frosty pane, she stared silently out into the night, seeing nothing of the sleet and storm, and hearing nothing of the wild winds.

She had been sitting there a long time, silent as death, a wild, scared look on her young face, a strange expectancy in her dusky eyes, and with the fine snow drifting in upon her slender figure and upon her garments like a thin shroud, when at last Tressilian's door opened, and Sir Windham Winn came out into the hall.

He looked tired and worn. He looked up and down the corridor, saw the silent figure in the great window-seat, and approached her with a weary step.

The girl turned her head slowly.

"He—he is dead?" she said, in a low, husky voice.

"Dead? Oh, no!" returned the Doctor cheerfully. "We have brought him safely through, Miss Olla. He is sleeping now, a regular, healthy sleep, yet one of perfect exhaustion. We have saved his life, with God's help, and, better still, his reason! When he awakens some hours hence, he will, I hope and believe, be in his right mind—in full possession of his intellect, his reason, and his memory. He will, in short, be himself again!"

CHAPTER XVI.

"THE WAY OF THE TRANGRESSOR."

As the two men, Jasper Lowder and Jacopo Palestro, continued to approach the very tree against whose huge trunk Sir Arthur Tressilian was leaning, the Baronet grew keenly apprehensive of discovery. He pressed closer against the tree stem, a deeper shadow among shadows, more silent than the leaves above him or the grass beneath his feet. And thus, in the still night and

the darkness, he watched the conspirators, and waited for them to speak with an eagerness that was painfully intense.

What was the mystery about his supposed son? What was the secret between him and this mysterious and sinister foreigner?

These were the questions weighing heavily upon the Baronet's soul. These were the questions to which he was determined to obtain an answer before he would yield into the hands of Jasper Lowder the whole future of lovely, innocent Blanche.

The two men came nearer, passed the tree quite unconscious of the eyes peering out from its shadow, and halted in the Park path, at the distance of a few paces from Sir Arthur, and well within ear-shot of the Baronet.

"You have got the two thousand pounds with you, Milord Sir Tresolino?" inquired Palestro.

"It is near at hand," answered Lowder.

"It is in gold, of course?" asked the Italian. "I do not like the paper money. It is but rags with writing upon it. Give me the yellow coin that rings when it falls. That is money the world over."

"The two thousand pounds is all in coin. I knew that you would have a prejudice against paper money."

"All in coin! It must be a fine sight!" cried Palestro, eagerly. "My fingers itch to get hold of it. Where did you get so much money in so short a time, Signore, when last night you declared you could not raise a sum so big?"

"It is my business where I got it," said Lowder, sullenly. "Yet stay; I will tell you. There is no need of squeamishness in the matter. I stole the money from—from my father's safe. I robbed him."

"Madre di Dio."

"He had the money in his safe last night. It was intended for the purchase of a farm. I stole the key of his safe from his chamber, and abstracted the money—"

"He is no squeamish lad, this Milord," cried Palestro, rolling up his eyes in admiration of his companion. "You should be a brigand, Sir Tresolino. But is not theft a crime? Why do you tell me of your guilt?"

"I should be the last person in the world to be suspected of the robbery," answered Lowder. "Even if you were to declare what I have told you, no one would believe you. You were seen about the grounds yesterday. Sir Arthur spoke of you as an ill-looking foreigner. Suspicion may be directed against you as the thief, if you are found hanging about the neighborhood longer. If the money were found in your possession, you would be convicted of the robbery upon circumstantial evidence, and sentenced to penal servitude for twenty years, possibly for life. With the money therefore I give you a warning. Have a trap convey you to Gloucester within the hour. Make all haste to quit England and you will be safe. Delay, and you are lost."

Palestro's teeth chattered with an absolute terror.

Lowder's object in revealing to him the truth concerning the robbery had been to cause him to quit England immediately. He desired to make it plain to Palestro that he would run his neck into a noose, should he venture to approach Sir Arthur Tressilian upon any pretext whatsoever. He meant to guard against any possibility of Palestro's treachery to himself, and his design was successful. The Italian would not have dared to draw the Baronet's attention upon himself for twice two thousand pounds, now that he comprehended the pitfall Lowder had dug for him.

"Yes, yes, Milord," he said shivering. "I will do as you say. I will go at once. Ah, what if I should be

found here? Why did I remain at the inn in the village all day? Why did I not go back to Gloucester last night? I am in one trap. Preste! One thousand demons! What would Giuditta say to this! Give me the money, Milord Sir Tresolino, and let me go.”

“One word, Palestro. Leave to-night and immediately, and I will guarantee your safety. Delay, and you are lost. Write me from Naples. Keep me informed every week, and you will find me true to my word. The day that finds me Sir Guy Tressilian, I will remit to you a second sum of two thousand pounds.”

“Thanks, Signore; I will be true as steel. I swear by the Madre del Dio and all the holy saints that I will never betray you. I swear to be true to you by this sign of the Cross.”

And as Palestro spoke, he waved his finger in the air, forming a sign of the cross. He had sworn an oath that would be binding upon him. Base and treacherous and unscrupulous as he was, he had yet a vague respect for the religion his mother had taught him in his innocent childhood, and he would not have dared to break this oath.

“That is well,” declared Lowder. “And now for the money. Follow me.”

He led the way along the park path, amid the dusky shadows. The moon, not yet at its full, had been hidden behind a bank of gray clouds all the evening, but now a few pale, watery beams straggled down through the rifts of the trees and played upon the figures of Lowder and Palestro, and dimly lighted the path they were treading. Sir Arthur Tressilian, keeping within the shadows of the trees, followed his guides.

Lowder led the way to the secluded spot where grew the hollow tree in whose heart he had hidden the stolen money. The two men and their unseen follower came

to a halt at this spot. Lowder plunged his hand into the recess formed in the hollow trunk, and drew out the bag of gold.

"There it is!" he said, letting it drop heavily upon the ground. "Take it, and be off!"

"One moment, Signore," answered Palestro, his cupidity overcoming for the moment his fears. "I will look at it."

He had a large black bag in his hand, formed of a stout skin. He unlocked this bag, and drew out a dark lantern. Reversing the slide of the lantern, a stream of light poured upon the bag of money, and upon the faces of the two men.

Palestro knelt on the ground and untied the string at the mouth of the money-bag, and plunged his hand eagerly within. Presently he brought into the light a handful of glittering coins. He examined them curiously. He rung them upon a stone near at hand, listening to their ring as to fairy music. With the suspiciousness of his kind, he plunged his hand between the yielding coin, bringing up treasure from the very bottom of the bag.

"It's all right," he muttered, with a gloating look at the yellow heap. "All right. Thanks, Signore. You will find me the most faithful of allies. You shall have tidings each week. I know where my own interests lie. And I shall be true to my oath."

He tied up the money, and thrust it into his capacious black bag, which he locked.

"Good-bye, Signore," he said. "And good luck!"

He turned to depart.

The conversation, which we have translated into English, had transpired in Italian, but Sir Arthur had heard and comprehended it fully, so far as the words went. But the hidden import of the scene he could not

penetrate. Why Lowder found it necessary to pay Palestro a bribe of two thousand pounds to insure his fidelity, the Baronet could not understand.

But he intended to know. He was a man of quick decisiveness. Therefore, as Palestro turned to go with the money Lowder had stolen, the Baronet stepped abruptly from the surrounding gloom into the circle of light caused by Palestro's lantern.

And there he halted, pale and stern, his arms folded across his chest, his rebuking, accusing eyes looking from one to the other of the conspirators!

It was a fearful moment for Jasper Lowder. A fearful moment for the scheming ex-scrivener.

Lowder recoiled several paces, with a wild cry of amazement and terror. Palestro let fall his lantern and clutched his bag, glaring wildly into the surrounding gloom.

“*You* here?” gasped Lowder, in a husky, frightened voice. “*You here?*”

The Baronet looked at his supposed son in an awful and accusing sternness.

“Yes, Guy,” he answered, “I am here. I have heard all that has passed between you and your accomplice. I know that you are the midnight robber who plundered my safe. And now—what does this mean?”

Lowder could not answer. His tongue clung to the roof of his mouth. He stood appalled, a very statue of horror.

Sir Arthur turned his stern and terrible eyes upon Palestro in the same awful glance.

“In payment of what service have you received this money?” he demanded in Italian.

Palestro's face turned a sickly yellow. He trembled in affright. He believed that he was about to be judged and sentenced upon the spot by this awe-inspiring

being as an accomplice of Lowder. Gasping for breath, he looked helplessly at his employer.

That glance reminded the usurper that his stolen position, his wealth, honors, and intended bride even, were all at stake. He struggled with his terror and emotion, and regained a measure of his self-control.

He approached Sir Arthur by two or three paces, and stood before the Baronet with head drooping low upon his breast, and with the aspect of a convicted criminal.

"Father," he said, in a low, choking voice, "I acknowledge my guilt. I stole the money from your safe! I know not what untoward fate has betrayed my secret to you, but I confess my crime!"

"Why did you rob me?"

"Because—because I owed this Italian the exact sum in your safe!"

"For what did you owe him?"

Lowder's head drooped lower still.

"It was a—a gaming debt," he whispered.

Sir Arthur made a gesture of abhorrence. Again he turned his glance upon Palestro.

The Italian, who, in his capacity of courier, had acquired a smattering of English, comprehended Lowder's statement, and hastened to corroborate it.

"It is true, Milord," he ejaculated eagerly. "The young man owed me for a gaming debt contracted at Naples. He was afraid Milord his father would hear of it. I pressed him for the money, for I have a wife to support. I am a poor man, Sir Tresolino," he added, in a whining voice. "Two thousand pounds is too big a sum for me to lose. Young men will be young men—"

Sir Arthur interrupted the fellow by a commanding gesture, and his glance returned to Lowder's face.

At the same moment the usurper made a quick, significant motion with his left hand, which had fallen to

his side. The Baronet did not observe the gesture, but Palestro both saw and comprehended it.

With a quick, serpent-like movement, taking advantage of Sir Arthur's averted gaze, he retreated into the surrounding shadow, his bag in his hand, and hurried away, bent upon securing his own safety and that of his basely acquired money.

The Baronet almost immediately discovered his flight, but he made no effort to pursue him. A greater grief than that occasioned by the loss of his money weighed upon his soul. The lantern burned brightly upon the ground between Sir Arthur and Lowder. The latter continued to stand with downcast head, and the former continued to regard him with stern accusing.

At last Sir Arthur broke the terrible silence.

“A liar—a thief—a gambler!” he said, in a slow, strange, sorrowful voice. “And this is my son? This is the heir and latest representative of the honorable line of Tressilians? This is the pure, honest, truthful, frank-souled boy I sent from me years ago? This is the son I have loved as my own soul?”

Lowder trembled before the awful pathos of that voice and these words. He began to realize what a disappointment he was proving to this high-minded, grand-souled Baronet. He had concealed his real nature and had played a part since his arrival at Tressilian Court; but, clever actor as he was, he could not always hide his real nature, nor could he always bend circumstances to his unscrupulous will. And now Sir Arthur was beginning to understand his real character.

“What shall I say?” cried the usurper, in a passionate voice. “I was thrown into temptation, and, like most young men in similar circumstances, I yielded. I gambled at Naples with that fellow. Ah, he is fled! I lied to conceal my folly and guilt. But I swear to

you that I have gambled but this once. As to the money of which I robbed you, you can let it go in this way instead of for a farm. Of course I must pay a debt of honor—"

"Of honor?" ejaculated Sir Arthur scornfully. "You talk of honor? And that man an inn-keeper, a retired servant; perhaps an ignorant, low fellow, is your friend and creditor! A pretty debt of honor which is paid from the proceeds of a robbery!"

"I—I didn't look at it as a robbery," muttered Lowder. "It was to buy me a wedding gift. Besides, it would have been mine some day with the Tressilian estates—"

"More's the pity. I am sorry for my tenants that such a landlord is in store for them. I am sorry for my servants. Had I the power I would alienate the estates from you and leave them to a stranger."

"I am no worse than any other young man," said Lowder sullenly. "I am sorry for my errors, and I will try to amend them. Here at Tressilian Court I shall have no temptations to evil, but every incentive to do right. This one error stands alone. Can you not forgive and overlook it?"

"I can forgive it, Guy, but I cannot forget it," responded Sir Arthur, in a pained voice. "I am terribly disappointed in you. I fear that my confidence in you can never be restored."

"Would you crush me for a single fault? I am not so bad as you think. I lied and I robbed you in self-defence. I dared not tell you of the pressing need I had of so much money. You might give me another chance. You cannot rub out the fact that I am your son!"

"I would that I could! I would that you had died in your innocent boyhood. The fact that it is my own

son who has so grossly deceived and cheated me, makes the deceit all the harder to bear. Yet I cannot lose the father in the judge. Wounded to the soul as I am, I will give you a chance to retrieve yourself. And, Guy,” added Sir Arthur, “you will understand, of course, that your marriage with Blanche must be postponed. I must understand your character better before I give my pure young ward into your keeping.”

Had a chasm suddenly yawned before Lowder, he could not have been more startled.

“That is not fair, sir,” he cried. “The marriage day has been appointed, and the servants and villagers are all gossiping about it. You are not just to me. You will not give me a chance to retrieve myself. If my marriage to Blanche is postponed, I shall become desperate. I need her loving influence, her tender guidance. If you deprive me of these, you wrong me cruelly!”

Sir Arthur did not appear greatly moved by this declaration. The stern lines about his mouth did not relax, nor the deep sadness in his eyes soften.

“If I allowed Blanche to marry you at present, I should wrong her yet more cruelly,” he observed. “She is an orphan, committed to my guardianship by her dying father. I will make no effort to break your engagement with her, but I shall insist upon the postponement of the marriage for a year, at the end of which time I can judge better of your worthiness to become her husband.”

Lowder’s face became suddenly inflamed with wrath. His anger deprived him of his usual prudence.

“You want to put off the marriage to give yourself a chance,” he cried, with a coarse sneer. “But so surely as you interfere between Blanche and me, just so surely will I betray your secret to her. What do you suppose

Blanche will say when she hears that her guardian, the man she regards as her father, loves her? Ha! you didn't know I had read your heart so well! You didn't know that I had discovered your secret worship for your 'young ward!' You can judge whether Blanche would be likely to remain long under your roof after I have imparted my discovery to her."

Sir Arthur looked aghast, as well he might. A painful flush burned on his cheeks.

"And this man is my son?" he murmured.

"Your son and your friend," returned Lowder, with an affectation of penitence for his hasty speech. "Give me a chance, father; let my marriage go on, and I will respect your secret. More—I will forget it. Let Blanche decide whether the marriage shall be postponed or not. Surely she ought to have a voice in the matter."

Sir Arthur remembered that it was Blanche who had made known to him the guilt of his supposed son. He believed that Blanche had ceased to respect Lowder, and that she would decide to postpone the marriage. He believed that she would decide as he would have decided for her, and his secret would be saved from a coarse betrayal. Therefore he assented to Lowder's proposition.

"We will leave the matter to Blanche!" he exclaimed. "She shall do as she pleases."

With these words he turned abruptly away from his supposed son, and retraced his steps through the park to the Court. And as he went, his grand face overspread with a look of awful desolation, he murmured again, in a broken voice, those words that sounded like the wail of a broken heart:

"And this man is my son? How have I deserved so fearful a punishment? What can have changed my

once noble boy into this treacherous, false-hearted man? My burden is greater than I can bear!"

CHAPTER XVII.

DESOLATION.

Sir Arthur Tressilian and Jasper Lowder did not meet again upon that night which had revealed to the former so much of the pretender's real character. After the Baronet's unsatisfactory interview with Lowder in the park, subsequent to the flight of Jacopo Palestro with the proceeds of Lowder's robbery, Sir Arthur returned to the Court and went wearily up to his own chamber.

Half an hour later, Lowder was heard coming softly up the stairs, proceeding to his own apartments.

The night that followed brought no sleep to the Baronet. Wounded to the core by the man who stood to him in the place of a son—his pride and hope in his supposed rightful heir cruelly destroyed—his own secret passionate love for Blanche made a rude mock by the usurper—doubts and fears struggling within his breast—those slow night-hours were freighted for Sir Arthur with an anguish too deep for groans and tears.

He sat in his unlighted chamber, a few pale moon rays streaming in through the window upon his bowed head. All around him within the chamber the shadows lay thickly, but deeper shadows were thronging thick and fast in his sorrowing soul.

"I could almost believe that this sullen, unprincipled man is not my son," he thought, in an awful bitterness. "I have loved Guy all my life better than I have loved

my own soul. Yet now my heart seems dead to him. I have no father's warmth of affection for him, no tenderness, no pity or excuses for his errors. It is as if he were nothing to me—as if an abyss had yawned between us. I feel toward him as toward a stranger. What can be the reason?"

But no glimmer of the actual truth came to Sir Arthur's perturbed brain. And had a suspicion of the imposture practiced upon him penetrated his mind, he would have rejected it as a wild and impossible chimera.

He held his sad and lonely vigil until long after the gray December dawn lighted up his chamber. But as the morning deepened, the necessity of "keeping up appearances" before his household aroused him, and he arose from his chair, made his toilet, and changed his garments.

He was the first in the breakfast-room, grave and sad and troubled, yet a kindly look beamed in his eyes as Blanche came in in her pretty morning dress. He would not allow his gloom to overshadow her.

She came up to him with extended hand. The consciousness that they shared together the secret of Lowder's guilt, lent a shyness to her manner.

"You are not looking well, Sir Arthur," she said, with perceptible anxiety.

"It is nothing, Blanche," he answered, laying his hand gently upon her waving golden tresses and withdrawing it abruptly, as if such caresses were henceforth to be denied him. "I did not sleep well."

The two were alone, Purmton and his assistants not yet having made their appearance. Blanche laid her hand lightly upon the Baronet's arm, drawing him toward the glass door.

"I am afraid I did wrong to tell you that secret," she murmured, as they paused before the out-look into the

dreary garden. "Oh, Sir Arthur! I have suffered so much since yesterday—"

"Sir Arthur!" repeated the Baronet, with a pang at his heart and a mild reproach in his voice, as he looked down into the fair, lovely face, framed in its golden tresses, and into the big, innocent gray eyes uplifted to his. "You are growing formal, Blanche. I notice that I do not often hear now the old familiar name of 'Guardy.' What has changed you so?"

The girl's hand fell from his arm. The sweet young face, tender as a violet, was swiftly averted, and Sir Arthur did not see the sudden tide of glowing scarlet that stained her pure cheeks, and even her forehead. Nor did he notice the pallor that succeeded that wild-rose flush.

He was silent a moment, fearing he had offended her; then he said gently:

"Forgive me, Blanche. Call me what you will: only bear in mind that I desire above all things, to act toward you the part of an affectionate father. As to that wretched business of Guy's, you did right to tell me. I had a long talk with Guy last night after you had retired. He does not know that you are aware of his guilt. He took the money to pay a gaming debt contracted in Naples."

"A gaming debt!" the girl murmured, shivering. "He—he gambles?"

Before Sir Arthur could reply, the door opened and Jasper Lowder sauntered into the room. There was no shadow of sleeplessness on *his* face; no shadow of trouble in *his* eyes. He considered the small matter of the robbery fully settled, and was prepared to overlook Sir Arthur's anger and disapproval, should the Baronet desist from all interference in his matrimonial project. He was prepared to carry matters with a high hand;

to assert the rights he had usurped of the heir of Tressilian Court ; and to conquer all opposing circumstances by the mere force of his natural audacity.

He glanced from one to the other of the two figures standing side by side at the glazed door, and his brow darkened, and a look of suspicion crept into his eyes.

"Has he been telling her of the robbery?" Lowder asked himself. "Has he informed her that I am the midnight thief? He would not have dared tell her so after my threat of last night."

He greeted Sir Arthur and Blanche courteously. The former responded coldly, the latter in an embarrassed manner. Purmton and his subordinates made a timely appearance with the hot-water dishes and their savory contents, and the trio took their seats at the table.

The meal progressed almost in silence. As they arose from the table at last, Lowder glanced out of a window, and said :

"This is a fine morning for a walk, Blanche. Will you come with me for a ramble along the river bank?"

Blanche hesitated a moment, and yielded assent. She hurried upstairs to prepare herself for the proposed excursion, while Sir Arthur went to his library, and Lowder leisurely attired himself in his greatcoat and gloves.

The usurper was standing upon the porch, beating an impatient tattoo with his heels, when Blanche came running down the stairs. She had donned a pretty blue walking dress, her white astrachan sacque and a jaunty turban, and looked as beautiful and lovely as a flower or sunlit picture.

Lowder offered her his arm. Not seeming to notice the civility, the girl ran on down the steps and led the way lightly across the wide lawn toward the river. Lowder followed her with a quick tread.

The Tressilian estates extended for more than a mile along the river bank. There was no road, nor pathway by the river, but fields strangely green for December crept close to the water's edge. These fields were separated by fences and hedges, but quaint, rustic stiles gave passage from one field to another. In summer it was one of the finest rambles in the county; and even now, with the green turf springing under the foot, and the leaden-hued river flowing past the high, stoned bank, it was not devoid of charms.

Blanche kept in advance until they had traversed the extensive lawn, but Lowder was walking at her side when she gained the first stile.

"It seems to me that you avoid me this morning, Blanche," said Lowder, with some annoyance, as he ascended and descended the stile after her. "Your manner is scarcely that of a girl to her betrothed husband. Has—has my father been setting you against me?"

Blanche turned upon Lowder indignantly.

"How can you ask such a question?" she demanded, her gray eyes flashing.

"Easily enough," returned Lowder, quickening his steps to match hers. "When I came upon you and him in the breakfast-room, I—I fancied that he had been saying something to my disadvantage."

"If he did, he said nothing but the truth."

Lowder's countenance changed.

"He did traduce me, then?" he cried. "He told you that I had—had committed—"

"A robbery? No, he did not tell me that. But we were speaking of it, notwithstanding," said Blanche calmly.

Lowder's face grew inflamed with anger.

"Curse him!" he ejaculated.

Blanche interrupted his further speech by a low, shocked cry.

"How dare you curse your father, Guy?" she exclaimed, looking at the usurper with horrified eyes, and drawing back from him as if he had been an embodied pestilence. "How dare you speak so to me of the noblest, tenderest father that ever lived, and whose heart you have pierced with your baseness and wrongdoing? Do you suppose *your* curse can bring harm upon *him*? You are not worthy to be his son—not worthy to be his servant!"

"He has a stanch defender in you," sneered Lowder. "Pity he can't hear you. Talk of baseness and treachery! He is the basest and most treacherous—"

"Stop!" commanded Blanche, her gray eyes shooting lambent fires. "I will not listen to such words from you. Are you not ashamed of yourself? Sir Arthur did not tell me you committed the robbery. It was I who told him!"

Lowder stared. He looked incredulous.

"Did—did he not first discover it last evening?" he demanded. "Did he not learn it by overhearing my conversation with the Italian?"

"I know nothing of your conversation with any Italian. I will tell you the truth. On the night of the robbery I was wakeful. I heard stealthy steps in the hall, and fearing robbers, I put on my dressing-gown with the intention of awakening Sir Arthur. I went out into the hall, and then I heard steps again. I had only time to crouch in the niche behind the bronze Crusader when I saw you come out of Sir Arthur's room with the safe key in your hand."

Lowder's face turned livid.

"You saw me!" he stammered, recoiling.

"Yes, I watched you as you sat down in the hall,

weak and trembling. I saw you go into your room for a light. I saw you go down-stairs, and crept after you. I witnessed the whole robbery."

Lowder gave utterance to a hoarse, wild cry.

"I saw you escape with your booty through the library window," continued Blanche mercilessly, in her high, excited, indignant voice. "I crept back to my room unseen. And yesterday morning I sent for my guardian and told him the truth. You can imagine how hard that truth was for him to bear. I pray Heaven I may never again witness an anguish like his. My own heart bled for him."

Lowder's excitement did not abate. His eyes glowed with supernatural lustre, shining like lamps out of the pallor of his face. He felt humiliated and angered that this girl should have witnessed his crime, should comprehend his baseness, should know so much of his real character.

"It was you, then, who put Sir Arthur upon my track last evening!" he muttered. "Did my father explain to you this morning my confession—my penitence?"

"He explained nothing, save that the money was taken to pay a gaming debt."

"It is so," said Lowder, drooping his head. "I told my father all last night. And he has quite forgiven me. The whole affair was but a boyish folly—"

"I regret that I cannot look upon the matter also in that light," returned Blanche coldly.

"Have you no pity, Blanche? Do you not see how terribly I suffer, in knowing that my error is laid bare to you?" cried Lowder passionately. "I gambled in Naples. I owed a man there two thousand pounds. He came to Tressilian Court yesterday, and hounded me for the money. My father regards gaming as a crime,

and I wished to conceal my wrong-doing from his eyes. I did not know how to obtain so much money on so short a notice. I knew that the sum I wanted was in the library safe, intended for my benefit. I did not look upon the matter as a robbery. I helped myself to what was to be my own."

"And insinuated that Purmton or Paxter, or some of the servants had committed the theft!" said Blanche in a voice of sarcasm.

"Blanche, you drive me to utter desperation. It is my first error. I mean it to be my last. Will you make the path of right so hard for me to tread! I have acknowledged my guilt. If suffering can atone for an error, mine is atoned for. You who never told a lie, who never swerved from the straight path of honesty and right cannot understand or pity my weakness—you cannot forgive it."

He stood before her in the midst of the field by the river bank, the very picture of despair. His convulsed features, his bowed head, his clenched hands told of an anguish that was not all feigned. In truth he was seized with a deadly alarm lest this pure, high-souled girl should utterly cast him off. And never until this moment had he felt how passionately and entirely he loved her. No thought of Hester—poor, gentle, clinging Hester—came to his perjured soul at this crisis of his life.

His appeal went to the girl's heart. Her beautiful features relaxed, and a pitying look came into her wide gray eyes.

"I am sorry for you, Guy," she said. "Heaven forbid that I should act the Pharisee. If you are truly repentant, I have no more words of anger for you."

"I am repentant—I am completely broken-hearted!" exclaimed the usurper in a tremulous voice.

Warm-hearted, generous Blanche came nearer to him extending her hand. He raised it to his lips.

They stood for a few moments on the bank of the cold, gray river, watching the sluggish stream. The thoughts of the girl were sorrowful ; those of the man full of rising triumph.

Presently they walked on along the river bank toward the next field. Blanche was shivering, warmly clad as she was, and despite the fact that the day was mild for the season. Looking up at the leaden-hued sky, the color of the gliding river, it seemed to her that her life, that had once seemed so gay and bright, had taken the same dull, sad tint.

At the second stile they halted. This stile was of the simplest description, a flight of steps on either side the fence, and a landing of some three feet square at the top, forming a junction of the two stairs.

"You look tired, Blanche," said Lowder. "Sit down on the step here. I want to hear you say that you forgive me—that you have not ceased to love me."

Blanche mounted to the topmost step and sat down. Lowder stood before her on the ground, the picture of sorrow and regret. He repeated his last words.

"I have nothing to forgive, Guy," the girl said gravely. "You have not sinned against me, but against your noble father !"

"He has forgiven me. As you say you have nothing to forgive, Blanche, let me hear you say you love me !"

He looked up at her with a passionate eagerness. But the lovely face clouded, the sweet grave eyes shone with a saddened light, and the tender, scarlet mouth quivered with an infinite sorrow.

"Guy," she said gently, "I cannot speak the words you want to hear."

"This—this accursed business has cost me your love, then?" he demanded savagely.

"Guy, I do not know that I have ever loved you," the young girl said, in a tender, pitying voice. "I will be as frank with you as with my own soul. When I used to read your letters to Sir Arthur; when I heard anecdotes of your bravery, your honesty, your truthfulness and self-devotion, I fancied you a grand and knightly being, an exalted soul—in short, a very hero of romance. And when you came home, investing you with all the fancied attributes of my ideal Guy, I blushed when you spoke to me; I was flattered by your notice; I thought I loved you. But in the very hour you asked me to marry you, I was conscious of a chill sense of disappointment. My happiness was not what I had expected. A vague discontent assailed me."

"You are complimentary!" cried Lowder bitterly.

"I am truthful. At times since our betrothal I have been very nearly happy, but I have always been unsatisfied and secretly discontented. I discovered some days since that I did not love you, Guy, as a wife should love. The truth has grown upon me by degrees, but at last I know my own heart."

"And you want to throw me over?" ejaculated Lowder, in a savage voice. "You can make a more brilliant match, perhaps. I am not a faultless 'hero of romance,' and the error I have committed is to be cause sufficient to expel me from the pale of virtue forever. You will let a little romantic nonsense stand between you and me. You could be my guardian angel, my better self, my guide, my redemptress—but you coolly decide to pass me by 'on the other side!'"

"Oh, Guy! it is not for this fault I have ceased to love you! In truth, I never loved you!"

"And is your promise to go for nothing? Last night

my father said to me that he feared you would wish to postpone the marriage a year on account of this affair. He said you were the daughter of his dead friend, and he must protect you, at whatever cost to himself and me. I told him how much I needed your loving influence and guidance. He replied that he knew it, but there were few women who would sacrifice themselves for another. He said he should ask you squarely if you had better not postpone the marriage, adding that it was his secret prayer and hope that you would stand by me and decide to fulfill your engagement. He said that my one error should not deprive me of his love, and he prayed that Blanche might remain true and steadfast to me !”

The girl's face grew yet whiter.

“Did he say that ?” she asked in a pained voice.

“Yes. He said it was his dearest wish to call you his daughter. He said that it would be the happiest day in his life could he witness our union. He said he would feel at ease about my future, my moral character, and my reputation, if you would become my wife. Yet, he added, he should the rather urge you to a postponement of the engagement, desiring to fully do his duty by his orphan ward.”

This plausible lie won Blanche's perfect credence.

She buried her face in her little white muff for a few moments. Then she said unsteadily :

“Guy, I was about to ask you to dissolve our engagement on the grounds I have stated. But I have changed my mind. Sir Arthur's wishes are sacred to me. I know that no son of his could be base at soul. He must have transmitted much of his own nobleness to you. I have expected too much. I have had notions too romantic, perhaps. I do not truly love you, but love may come in time. And—and I esteem Sir Arthur so

highly that I would sacrifice myself to gratify his slightest wish. I will marry you in February, on the day appointed !”

“And if my father urges you to wait?”

“I shall not let him know that I am aware of his secret hopes. I will keep my promise to you. And now, Guy, let me return to the Court. It is very cold this morning.”

Lowder helped her down from the stile, his face glowing with elation. They returned to the Court—he happy and triumph, she silent and sorrowful.

Sir Arthur met them in the hall, and invited Blanche into the library. The girl removed her outer wraps and sent them up to her room by a servant, then following the Baronet into the room designated.

Lowder, confident in his victory, strolled into the drawing-room to await the issue of the interview.

Sir Arthur closed the library door and conducted his young ward to a seat by the fire. Drawing a chair near to hers, he said :

“Has Guy said anything to you about that miserable money?”

“Yes, Sir Arthur. He told me how penitent he was. He knows now that I witnessed the—the affair.”

“I have been thinking, Blanche, that your marriage had better be postponed a year or two. I cannot allow you to risk your own happiness in this matter. Guy has changed strangely. He is not worthy of you.”

“There is much good in him—there must be ! He is your own son, Sir Arthur, and must have inherited many of your noble qualities. I must cling to him. Perhaps my influence may be what he needs. I cannot utterly condemn him for this one error. I am twenty years old—old enough surely to decide in this matter for myself. I thank you, dear Guardy, for your solici-

tude for my happiness, but I cannot consent to a postponement of the marriage."

"Take time to consider the subject, Blanche—"

"I need no further time. I have decided," said the girl wearily. "Do not pain me by urging me to reconsider my decision. I must marry him at the time appointed!"

"You love him despite all, Blanche?"

The girl's face flushed painfully. In that flush Sir Arthur read his answer.

"What a mystery is love!" murmured the Baronet huskily. "In sorrow, in shame, in anguish, it remains true and steadfast! God in heaven bless you, my child, for your noble devotion to my son! And may the man you love fulfill all your highest expectations!"

He laid his hand on her little golden head in blessing. Then with a convulsed face he turned from her, crossing the room.

The girl arose and moved blindly toward the door—her hand sought the door knob with trembling touch, and turned it. She went out into the hall, sped up the stairs, and locked herself within her own sitting-room.

And there she fell upon her knees, sobbing wildly:

"It is a sacrifice—a terrible sacrifice. I do not love Guy. I do not even respect him. But I will try to ennoble him for his father's sake. I will devote myself to elevating him. It is all I can do to repay Sir Arthur for all his life-long care and kindness to me. Oh, I have been blind—blind! I have awakened to the truth at last, and it crushed me to the very earth. I am engaged to Guy and I love Sir Arthur, who looks upon me as a child, and who prays that I may have love and courage to cling to his son! How Sir Arthur would scorn me if he knew my presumption! How he would smile at my

folly ! It is he who realizes my ideal—whom alone I love ! And for his sake I will marry Guy !”

Her whole frame quivered as with an ague. She buried her face in the cushions of her couch, and sobbed in a very abandonment of grief.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE SURGEON'S SUCCESS.

Meanwhile, how fared poor Guy Tressilian ?

The operation that had been performed upon our hero by the great London surgeon had not been unattended with extreme peril. The greatest skill of Sir Windham Winn had been brought into requisition. And there had been moments when Tressilian's life had hung in the balance, and it had seemed that the merest chance must decide whether he would live or die. There had been even one moment when Sir Windham had paused from his labors, believing that the life, that had flickered under his touch like the light of a candle in the wind, had died out entirely. But as the chest rose feebly again the surgeon resumed his labors, with what result he had himself declared to Olla.

The girl could hardly comprehend the great surgeon's success. She had believed Tressilian to be dying. And now she was assured that in all probability he would live, and regain the full possession of his senses. It seemed a joy too great for belief.

“It seems a miracle,” she murmured. “Oh, Sir Windham, he shall thank you himself for saving his

life and his reason. I cannot find words to thank you."

"My triumph is sufficient reward," declared Sir Windham, smiling. "But, Miss Olla, what is this young man to you?"

"Nothing, Sir Windham. I have never known him when he was in his right mind. I have cared for him out of pity—"

"And 'pity is akin to love!' " said the surgeon. "He is a well looking young fellow. Take care of your heart, Miss Olla. These handsome, penniless young men are fond of heiresses. There, you need not blush so, my child. I did not mean to offend you. Will you not come and look in upon our patient?"

Olla assented, and shook off the fine snow clinging to her figure. Then she followed Sir Windham into Tressilian's chamber.

A dim light, that of a single candle in a distant corner, pervaded the apartment. But the figure in the bed was plainly visible. Olla approached the couch and studied the face upon the pillow.

It was as white as the linen against which it lay, and the features were as sharply defined as if cut in stone. It looked like the face of a dead man, so white, so calm, so fixed in its stern repose. The eyelids drooped against his cheeks ; his lips were slightly parted. And his chest scarcely stirred the clothing above it, as it rose and fell in its faint pulsations.

"This is life almost like death," murmured Olla.

"He will waken from this sleep in a few hours, and in his right mind," declared Sir Windham. "Put your hand on his forehead."

Olla obeyed. There was a slight perspiration upon the marble cold brow.

They stood a little longer by the couch, and Sir Windham said :

"Let us go down to the drawing-room. Popley, who is behind the curtains at the foot of the bed, will watch our patient, and report any change in him. We must guard against every noise in the house."

They descended to the drawing-room. Olla issued her orders that the house should be kept in a perfect silence, and the order was obeyed to the letter. Mrs. Popley and Mrs. Kipp sat in the housekeeper's room and talked in whispers. The driver of the post-chaise which had brought our travellers to Bleak Top, and Kit Kipp, alternated between the stable and the housekeeper's room, and also talked in whispers.

The evening had fallen early. Night had succeeded before the surgical operation had been concluded. It was nearly eight o'clock on the tempestuous winter night when Mrs. Popley entered the drawing-room, stepping gingerly upon her toes, and announcing in a sepulchral whisper that supper waited.

Sir Windham and Olla crossed the draughty lower hall to the dining-room. Here supper was served, of game-birds, toasted crumpets, coffee and tea, and various other dainties. The surgeon brought a good appetite to the meal, and nearly an hour was spent at table, at the expiration of which time they returned to the drawing-room.

At ten o'clock Sir Windham looked in upon his patient, but no change had occurred in him. Leaving word with Popley that he was to be called at the slightest indication of a change, the surgeon retired to his own chamber and went to bed.

Olla put out the fires and lights of the drawing-room and hall, and crept upstairs to her own room. It was the picture of cheerful coziness. Her dressing-gown and

slippers were warming before the blazing fire ; lights were burning ; the curtains were drawn, and Mrs. Popley, in list slippers, awaited her with a beaming countenance.

"Everything has gone well, Miss Olla," said the faithful old woman, as Olla softly closed the door. "The young gentleman is in a fine perspiration, and his breathing grows louder. It's as fine a natural sleep as one could wish to see. Jim will call me at one o'clock, when I'm to watch."

"You must call me if there is a change in him for the worse," said Olla. "If—if he should die, I must be with him. I cannot be persuaded that he is yet out of danger. And if he should die, nurse," she added, in a quivering voice, "his last gaze must be fixed upon the sympathizing face of a friend."

Mrs. Popley gave the required promise, and Olla, wearied with her journey from London and her emotions, undressed herself, said her prayers, and went to bed.

In half an hour she was soundly asleep.

The stillness of death was in all the halls and rooms of the lonely mountain house. No sound came from Tressilian's room, whether of life or death. At one o'clock, when the night was at its stillest within, but wildest without, and the old stone house seemed to rock in the mighty gale, Mrs. Popley stole to the sick man's chamber, releasing her son from his wearisome vigil.

The night wore on, and still Tressilian lay in that trance-like slumber. The dawn broke at last, and subdued sounds of life were heard in the kitchen, but he did not arouse.

At seven o'clock—it was barely daylight then—Sir Windham Winn tapped gently at the door, and as softly entered the room.

"There is no change, sir !" whispered Mrs. Popley.

"What ! He has not awakened yet !" returned the surgeon, his face changing. "I must see to him !"

He glided to the bed, and bent over Tressilian feeling his pulse. It was low, but regular.

As he raised his glance from his watch, Tressilian's eyes opened, and were fixed upon him in an inquiring expression. The gaze was that of a sane man.

The surgeon's heart, bound up in his profession, throbbed with joy. He knew how near the gates of death Tressilian had been, and he regarded his operation as a very triumph of surgery.

Tressilian's lips moved feebly.

"Who are you ?" he whispered.

"I am the surgeon, Sir Windham Winn. Don't bother yourself, young man. Just take things as they come. You are among friends. That is all you need to know for the present."

Tressilian smiled faintly, and his eyes closed wearily.

"Here, Mrs. Popley," said Sir Windham, "have a basin of gruel made directly."

"It is made already," returned the woman. "It has been waiting an hour, but I began to think it would never be wanted."

She hurried out silently, presently returning with a bowl of gruel. Sir Windham took the tray from her, sat down upon the side of the bed, and proceeded to feed his patient with the tenderness of a woman.

"There !" he exclaimed at last. "You feel better now, with half a pint of gruel to give you strength. By to-morrow you shall have chicken broth, but your promotion depends upon your improvement."

Again Tressilian smiled. Then his eyes wandered from the face of the rough, kindly surgeon, searching the room with an expectant gaze.

"Who are you looking for?" asked Sir Windham.

"Perhaps it was only a dream," murmured Tressilian faintly. "But I had a vision of a young girl—beautiful, lovely, tender. I want her. Is there no young girl here?"

"You mean Olla!"

Guy repeated the name of Olla in a sort of rapture.

"The name comes straight to my lips," he murmured. "Her name is Olla. I want her. Olla!" he added dreamily, and in tender accents. "Olla!"

"Olla will come in presently. You have been very ill, young man. You owe life, reason, everything to Olla! Had she not taken care of you, protected you, pitied you, you would to-day have been an idiot or a corpse!"

In his admiration of Olla, the good surgeon had said more than he intended. But the effect of his words upon Tressilian had not been hurtful. The pale, wan face brightened, the glorious blue eyes flamed with gratitude and tenderness, and a smile of exquisite beauty curved his lips.

"I shall never forget what I owe Olla!" he murmured. "Never!"

And with the words yet on his lips he again dropped asleep.

"He'll do now," said the surgeon heartily. "Another sleep is what he wants. Is Miss Olla below?"

Mrs. Popley answered in the affirmative, and Sir Windham descended to the drawing-room. Olla was there, and came eagerly to meet him.

"Has he wakened?" she asked.

"Yes, and has had his breakfast. He is doing better even than I expected. He is himself again. I will give you directions for his treatment. As for me, I must return to town to-day."

"So soon? Are you sure he can spare you yet?"

"Quite sure. I am needed in town, and I dare not delay my return. See how the snow is falling!"

Olla glanced from the window. The snow flakes were falling thickly.

"To-morrow the mountain road may be impassible," said Sir Windham. "I must order the post-chaise at once. My patient is out of danger, and a good nurse is all that is wanted now."

Olla expressed her regrets at losing the surgeon so soon, and then went out to order the post-chaise for Sir Windham's return journey to Alnwick. The surgeon occupied himself in her absence by writing out an ample list of directions for the care of the invalid upon a leaf of his note-book, and this he tore out and gave the young girl on her return.

"I have here provided against all contingencies of fever and other drawbacks," he said. "Should any serious change occur for the worse, telegraph to me. And should that rascally Gower make you any trouble, let me know. I have left all necessary medicines, but he needs little doctor stuff. What he wants is, as I said before, good nursing and a generous diet as soon as he can bear it, which will be in a day or two."

Breakfast was announced at this moment. Olla led the way to the cozy dining-room, and Sir Windham attacked his repast with energy. In the course of the meal he told Olla of Tressilian's inquiries for her, at the narration of which the young girl blushed rosily.

The driver of the post-chaise had already breakfasted some time since, and by the time Sir Windham had finished his repast the carriage rolled out of the stable-yard, and the horses were driven around to the carriage porch.

The surgeon hastened to wrap himself for the jour-

ney. Mrs. Popley brought him a small hamper of food and wine to mitigate the cold and loneliness of the drive. Adieux were said, and Sir Windham Winn entered the waiting vehicle, and was hurried away, soon disappearing behind a vail of falling snow and going down the mountain side.

As Olla stood on the porch looking thoughtfully after him, Mrs. Kipp, who was near and anxiously scanning the dull gray sky, exclaimed :

“The surgeon has got away just in time, Miss Olla. And it's lucky we've laid in such a stock of provisions. We shall need them. And if that Mr. Gower is on his way here,” she added grimly, “he'll have to come before noon. See how the snow falls ! We are going to be snowed in.”

The prophecy seemed in a fair way of fulfillment. The ground was covered thickly with snow, and the great feathery flakes were falling fast and faster in a white impenetrable vail. The process of “snowing in” the occupants of lonely Bleak Top had surely commenced.

CHAPTER XIX.

SNOWED IN.

During the remainder of the day on which Sir Windham Winn, the great London surgeon, departed from Bleak Top, the snow continued to fall silently and heavily, filling the air with its dense whiteness. During the night there was no abatement of the snow fall. And during the second day and night the feathery flakes fell ceaselessly, and the white whirlwinds formed by the

light snow and the wind shut out from the gaze of the dwellers at Bleak Top all view of the outside world.

No one, excepting the housekeeper's son, ventured outside the doors of the mountain house while the storm continued. Christopher Kipp ploughed his way to the cow-house and stable at regular periods, to see that the dumb-beasts did not suffer for food and water ; but for the most part he sat by the kitchen fire, or in his mother's room. Popley remained in charge of Tressilian, but his cares were shared with his mother and his young mistress, who proved herself the tenderest and gentlest of nurses.

The great feature of in-door life while the storm raged was the magnificent wood fires that burned and glowed on every hearth in the draughty old house. And while Nature was weaving her wintry shroud for the dying year, and wearing an aspect of utter dreariness and desolation, all was brightness, warmth and glow within the walls of Bleak Top.

Upon the morning of the third day after Sir Windham's departure, the prophecy of good Mrs. Kipp was accomplished. The inmates of the lonely mountain house were snowed in.

And upon that morning the snow ceased falling. The air was chill and cold ; the sky gray and wintry, with no promise of warmth or thaw ; and the wind was like a blast fresh from the North Pole.

Olla, coming out of her room at the usual hour, on her way down to breakfast, with a shawl drawn over her head and shoulders, paused to look from the wide window at the end of the windy hall upon the picture so novel to her eyes.

There was a patch of snow on the hall carpet, and a bed of snow lay on the broad window ledge. The panes were covered with frost pictures, through whose

fantastic images no vision could pass. Olla breathed upon the glass, rubbing it with her handkerchief, and presently was rewarded with a loop-hole of observation, as it might be called—a clear bit of glass as large as a crown piece.

Through this small outlook she beheld a scene that might have been taken up bodily out of Switzerland, and dropped on this lonely Scottish border.

Near and far, wherever her eye could see, lay the dazzling sheet of snow. The road that led past Gloam Fell, Hester Lowder's refuge, down to the hamlet of Gloamvale, could not be distinguished save by huge drifts through which no track had been made. The fences dividing the fields and sheep pastures, and the hedges about Bleak Top, were many of them completely buried under the snow. The trees bordering the drive, the larches and northern firs, were weighted heavily with lines of snow that lay evenly on every branch and twig. In the distance Carter Fell stood grimly outlined against the sky, under a crown and mantle of snow. Nearer, the old farm-house of Gloam Fell and the dwellings in the hamlet of Gloamville peered darkly out from under heavy thatches of the snow, reminding one of the darkly withered face of an old French woman under her white Norman cap.

"It is like a fairy scene," breathed Olla. "Snow everywhere—a snow world! I see no roads, no paths. The snow will be a better guardian to us than any man. I feel now that I can defy Mr. Gower—that, so long as the snow lasts, I am safe from his intrusion."

The thought afforded her a strange feeling of security. Isolated by the great drifts from the outside world, she felt as if she were in a fortress as impregnable as any castle of feudal times.

This feeling continued for several days, for the

intense cold continued, the snow did not thaw, and by Olla's command, no road was broken down to the valley. The old stone house on the mountain summit was indeed isolated from the rest of the world. No breath came to them of the events transpiring elsewhere. Not a hint of life outside penetrated to their retreat. Olla kept up her great hospitable fires in every hall and inhabited room ; Mrs. Kipp and Mrs. Popley vied with each other in delicate preparations for the table of their young mistress and the palate of the invalid ; and an air of gayety and brightness pervaded every room of the mansion.

And how fared Tressilian during all these days ?

From the hour in which he had awakened from his long trance-like sleep, before the departure of Sir Windham Winn, he had entered upon his convalescence.

As his physical strength had not been drained from him by slow and wasting disease, as his weakness and lethargy had been the result of his mental illness, and not of bodily ailment, so now, the pressure upon his brain being removed, his recovery was rapid.

Olla, in company with Mrs. Popley, attended upon him regularly. She sat at first silently by his side, anticipating his wants, but as he grew stronger she read to him tender poems, she sang to him sweet old ballads, and talked to him upon all unexciting subjects. Tressilian's identity was never mentioned, and he had not yet spoken of himself.

It was pleasant to see Tressilian's dependence upon the slender young girl. He begged for her presence almost continually. He would not eat unless she carved his food. In her absence he was silent and sad, tortured by a host of uneasy thoughts. When she was near he was also silent, but his face was radiant with a

joy and satisfaction beyond the power of words to describe.

One afternoon, a week after the arrival of the party at Bleak Top, and while the snow blockade was still in full force, Olla went up to Tressilian's room after an early dinner, according to her usual custom. In response to her low knock upon the door, Mrs. Popley's voice bade her enter, and she went in.

Her first glance was, as usual, toward the bed, but Tressilian was not there. Turning, bewildered, she found him sitting in a great easy-chair at the corner of the hearth, his feet on the fender. He was fully dressed in a suit of black clothing Popley had purchased for him at Marseilles, and his feet were encased in slippers. A large white blanket covered the chair completely, screening him from draughts.

He was very pale and very thin. His great luminous blue eyes shone like stars from out the pallor of his countenance. His tawny beard had been freshly trimmed by Popley, who had dressed him, and his sunny hair was tossed carelessly back from his wide white forehead. Despite the traces of recent and terrible illness, he had never looked brighter or handsomer.

He looked up at Olla in smiling deprecation.

"Don't look so grave, Olla," he said. "I am not at all imprudent. I am stronger than I look. Popley agreed that I was quite well enough to be up and dressed."

"He is indeed, Miss Olla," confirmed Popley. "It is better for him to be up than to be in bed so restless. And if he keeps on improving, he will be able to go down to dinner to-morrow."

A faint shadow crept over Olla's lovely face. To her, Tressilian's recovery meant his separation from her. She would gladly have kept him as he was for a while

longer, the thought of his going away from her giving her a pang like a knife thrust.

Conquering the pain, she smiled as she said :

" I am glad you are so much better, Jasper. Your recovery must be rapid now."

" It will be. Draw your chair beside me, Olla. I want to talk with you."

Popley withdrew, going down to the kitchen for his dinner. Mrs. Popley took her sewing to a distant window, and ensconced herself in the light. Olla pushed a low chair near to Tressilian, and sat down beside him.

" I want to talk to you of myself this afternoon," Tressilian said, reaching out and taking her hand. " Oh, Olla ! how shall I ever thank you enough for all you have done for me ? Sir Windham Winn told me that I owed my life and reason to you ! How shall I ever repay my debt of gratitude to you ?"

He pressed her hand to his lips, kissing it with a tender passionateness, a deep and holy reverence.

" Do not speak to me of gratitude, Jasper," said the girl, flushing under his passionate gaze.

" Gratitude is too cold a word," he sighed, clinging to her hand. " Oh, Olla ! I could worship you when I think from what you have saved me. So noble, so tender, so true ! I know all about you, Olla. I questioned Popley yesterday when you were at dinner, and he told me all your history. How could one, with such trials as yours, take upon herself a burden like me ? Yours is a brave and noble soul, Olla—the bravest and noblest I ever knew !"

Again he kissed her hand silently. As Olla did not reply, he presently resumed :

" As I said, I know all about you, Olla. I know of your self-sacrifice and tenderness to a helpless stranger. But what do you know of me ? I did not question Pop-

ley concerning myself, for I desire to hear what you knew of me from your own lips."

Thus questioned, Olla told him frankly all she knew of him, commencing her narrative with an account of her own flight from her guardian at Naples. She told how she had fled to Palermo; how she had been pursued by Mr. Gower, who had removed her to the Villa Bella Vista, upon the Bay of Palermo. She told how she had discovered Tressilian at the Vicini cottage, upon one of her rambles; how she had become interested in him; how he had once visited her at Mr. Gower's villa; and how, when she fled from Sicily, she had made him a sharer in her flight. She described the journey to Naples; the Vesuvius Inn and its keepers; the hurried journey toward Termoli; the capture by brigands; the brigand Doctor's experimenting operation upon Tressilian's wound; the rescue by Neapolitan troops, and the journey to England, with the accompanying incidents, and the few events that had followed.

"I remember the brigand's cavern, and your noble and spirited conduct there," said Tressilian thoughtfully. "I also remember the journey to England, but after our arrival at the Victoria Hotel all is a blank. Where are we now, Olla?"

"In Northumberland, among the Cheviot Hills, and upon the Scottish border! This mountain is Bleak Mountain; this house is known as Bleak Top. It belongs to me!"

"What a strange experience mine has been!" said Tressilian. "Shipwrecked—wounded—imbecile—and saved by the noble devotion of a young girl. But for you I should have died there. Olla! Do you know whom I am?"

"Oh, yes, Jasper," said Olla, arising and taking down a small parcel from the mantel-piece. "If we had not

known otherwise, these relics would have told us. Look !”

She unfastened the packet and laid upon his knees the articles that had been found upon his person, and which Mrs. Vicini had been careful to leave upon him. They consisted of a small note-book, a portmonnaie, a pocket-knife and a handkerchief, all bearing within or upon them the name of Jasper Lowder.

Tressilian turned them over, recognizing them at once.

“ You found these upon me ?” he questioned, in surprise.

“ Popley found them in your pockets, Jasper.”

“ You call me Jasper. Why ?”

A vague alarm looked from Olla's dusky eyes.

“ Have you forgotten your own name, Jasper ?” she asked, in a tremulous, pleading voice. “ Have you forgotten that you are Jasper Lowder, and that you were the travelling companion of a wealthy young Englishman.”

Guy started, his eyes dilating.

“ Tell me of him,” he exclaimed excitedly—“ of my travelling companion ! He perished in the wreck ? Poor, noble fellow !”

“ No ; he did not perish. He was but little injured. He remained with you that first night at the Vicini cottage. He had a consultation with Dr. Spezzo the next day, and the doctor told him that your recovery was impossible. He did everything that was possible for your comfort, but his friends were expecting him, and he was obliged to hurry on to England.”

“ His friends ? He had no friends ! Why did he desert me among strangers ? Why did he not bring me back to England ?”

“ Because, Jasper, as you had no friends or relatives

living—no one to care for you—he thought it would be better for you to remain in Sicily.”

“No friends! No relatives! I don’t understand. Did he not write to my father?”

“He said you had no relatives—no father, Jasper,” Olla answered soothingly. “He was very kind, as kind as any brother. He gave every direction for your comfort, and left money for your expenses. As you were friendless, he said it would be better to drag out your blighted life in that secluded spot, and in the care of these kindly peasants. He said there was no reason why you should ever leave Sicily.”

“He said that?”

Olla was alarmed by the fire in Tressilian’s eyes; the excitement of his manner.

“Hush, Jasper,” she pleaded. “He ought to have taken you to England and procured a first-class surgeon for you; but do not blame him as selfish. Remember that these wealthy young men are taught oftentimes to consider themselves above all others. He is the son of a Baronet, and was impatient to get home.”

Tressilian’s blue eyes burned with a strange light.

“Who did you say he was?” he asked.

“Oh, Jasper! Do you not remember?” cried Olla. “You know that he is Guy Tressilian, son of Sir Arthur Tressilian of Tressilian Court!”

Tressilian uttered a hoarse cry. His face fairly blazed with excitement. Like a flash the whole truth burst upon his soul. Lowder had thought him an idiot beyond cure, and, taking advantage of the singular likeness between them, had gone to England and assumed the name and place of Guy Tressilian!

“I see! I see!” he murmured. “And—he—is now at Tressilian Court?”

“Yes, Jasper. Sir Windham Winn said that Mr. Guy

Tressilian had returned some time since from abroad. Certainly he is at Tressilian Court. Where should he be if not with his father?"

Tressilian gasped for breath like a drowning man.

"The villain! The dastardly traitor! The false friend! The base thief!" he hissed, while his blue eyes blazed with an awful sternness. "The—"

"Jasper! Mr. Lowder! Be quiet, in Heaven's name! This excitement may injure you!" cried Olla, in a terrible alarm.

Tressilian did not seem to hear her.

"He bent over me as I lay on the beach!" he said excitedly. "He thought me dead or dying. Oh, I see it all! Even in that awful moment of terror and shipwreck, he dared to plan a crime. He stole the papers and diary and other articles from my person, substituting these things of his! The treacherous schemer!"

"Oh, Jasper!" moaned Olla, in her terror. "Be calm. What is it excites you so? Jasper—"

Tressilian waved his hands in a wild gesture, disclaiming the name with utter loathing.

"*He* is Lowder!" he cried—"Jasper Lowder! I picked him up at Baden. I believed him an honest, poor young fellow, who had left England in order to get a living by teaching his native language in Germany. How I trusted him! How I loved him! And how he has cheated and deceived me! It seems as though I should go mad!"

Poor Olla began to fear that her charge had indeed gone mad. Forgetful of everything in her anxiety for him, she arose and leaned over him. She let her cool soft hands drop gently on his head, in a little shower of pats and strokes, that soothed him like the long-forgotten caresses of his dead mother.

"Hush ! Oh, hush !" she pleaded. In mercy to yourself and me, be calm !"

There was a bitter and awful calmness in Tressilian's voice, as he exclaimed :

"Be calm, while that villain has taken my place in my father's heart ! I have been near to death, I have been an imbecile, but my father has not known my peril. No instinct has told him that Jasper Lowder is not his son. He has stolen my name and friends and patrimony, and left me to perish among strangers. How can I be calm, Olla ? The wretch whose plausible seeming won my faith and love, whose resemblance to me has deceived my own father who has not seen me for years—he is the real Jasper Lowder. And I—I am Guy Tressilian !"

Despite the strangeness of Tressilian's tones and manner, there was that in his looks that confirmed his assertion. After her first shock of surprise, Olla gave his declaration full credence.

She moved shyly from his chair, returning to her own seat.

"And you are Guy Tressilian ?" she murmured.

"Yes ; I am the only son of Sir Arthur Tressilian."

"What is to be done ?" asked Olla, looking out of the window upon the great impassable snow-drifts. "The roads must be broken. We must telegraph to Sir Arthur—"

"Not so," interposed Guy, with a natural bitterness. "Let me stay here until I am well. My father has never missed me. He has taken that treacherous fellow to his heart in my stead. I will not go to Tressilian Court until I am more like my old self. Who knows but I should be turned out as an impostor ?" he added, with a bitter smile.

"You shall stay, Guy ; and you shall go to Tressilian

Court unannounced, and confound this Lowder, when you get well," cried Olla, with spirit. "But do not blame your father for accepting this impostor as his son. I know that he is not satisfied with him. Nature will not permit your father to give to him the love that belongs to you. It will be the happiest day of Sir Arthur's life when you return to him and claim your own. You must exert yourself to get back your strength as soon as possible, Guy; for with your strength will come your happiness."

Tressilian looked full upon the bright, arch, glowing face, so glorious in its rare beauty, and thought within himself, with a passionate glow at his heart :

"But one thing can give me happiness. I cannot marry Blanche, as my father desires. It seems as if I had known Olla for years; and I love her better than home, father, or friends. Beautiful, precious Olla! I will not leave this place till she promises to be my wife. But will she marry a man whom she first knew as an imbecile, and whom she cared for out of charity? What would she think if she knew that my gratitude to her has yielded to love—the love a man feels but once, and then forever?"

But not yet did he dare put his hopes into words.

CHAPTER XX.

AN INTERCEPTED LETTER.

Sir Arthur Tressilian's secret dissatisfaction with his supposed son increased, instead of diminished, as the days went by. The affair of the robbery, and Lowder's baseness in attempting to throw suspicion upon the

Baronet's servants, was continually in his mind. The suspicion grew upon him that the money had not been stolen from his safe to pay any gaming debt, but rather to purchase Palestro's secrecy in regard to some past event. The Italian's promise to write weekly to Lowder recurred to him, confirming this suspicion. He felt that there was some mystery about his pretended son, but as yet no glimmer of the truth, however faint, came to comfort his anguished soul.

Gradually, studying Lowder keenly and closely, he grew to believe the young man guilty of some crime while on the Continent. It was a terrible belief to grow in the heart of a father toward his son, and, as we have said, Sir Arthur had no suspicion that Lowder was not his son. And what that crime was the Baronet was determined to know before he yielded into the usurper's hands the future, whether for weal or woe, of pure, noble, golden-haired Blanche.

As may be imagined, there was no longer any warmth in the heart of Sir Arthur toward his supposed son. The young man's want of common honor, honesty and truthfulness had stifled the last spark of kindly feeling the Baronet may have felt toward him. A feeling of loathing began to grow up in Sir Arthur's heart toward Lowder, and strive as he would, he could not conquer or uproot it.

Lowder was not conscious of the change in the Baronet's feelings toward him. All his energies were bent to the task of reinstating himself in the good opinion of Blanche, which, he feared, he had greatly jeopardized in the late matter of the robbery. He told her a hundred times that his future depended upon her; that she had it in her power to make him honored, or to drive him to recklessness and ruin. He adjured her, by her love of her guardian, to cling to and save her

guardian's son. He coined a score of lying tales of what her guardian had said concerning the proposed marriage, and Blanche believed him. Believing him, she consented that the preparations for the marriage should go on. Believing that Sir Arthur desired above all things to behold her the wife of his son, she was ready to sacrifice herself for the sake of making happier the guardian she secretly loved.

One evening Sir Arthur lingered at the lamp-lit dinner-table after Blanche and Lowder had departed to the drawing-room. The Baronet was thoughtful, gloomy. His disappointment in his supposed son, his anxieties of various sorts, weighed heavily upon him. The idea that there was something wrong about Lowder preyed upon him, and he was wondering what steps he should take to learn the truth.

"I ought to have detained that Palestro," he thought. "Had it not been for the shame and anguish of my discovery that Guy was the robber who had stolen my money, I should have been keener to deal with the Italian. But that discovery seemed to paralyze my energies. Why did he agree to write to Guy weekly? What will he write about?"

He was considering these questions when the butler, portly old Purmton, came in with a small leather letter-bag, which had just been brought from the post-office. Glad of a relief from his thoughts, Sir Arthur unlocked the bag with a small key that hung from his watch-chain, and devoted himself to the examination of its contents.

- There were his London daily journals; a couple of favorite weeklies; a stock journal. These the Baronet tossed aside, as he discovered several letters. One of these, a small square envelope, with a very large monogram, was addressed to "Miss Blanche Irby." Sir Arthur

put it aside, and glanced over his own missives. These were four in number. One of them was from his banker in London, acknowledging the receipt of sundry funds. A second was from the secretary of a railway company, calling his attention to some matter which concerned him as a director. The third was from the secretary of a tin mine in Wales, in which Sir Arthur had stock, giving him notice of a proposed declaration of dividends. The fourth letter was from a London tradesman, and concerned an order the Baronet had given a fortnight earlier for a set of sapphires, intended as a bridal gift to his ward, to supplement the present of the Tressilian diamonds.

Sir Arthur glanced at them all, and laid them on the table, sighing heavily. As he did so, he noticed a very thin, foreign looking letter, which had slipped unseen between the folds of the stock journal, and was now barely visible. He withdrew this letter from its half concealment, saw that it was addressed "to the young Sir Tressilian," and tore it open.

Its contents, written upon a sheet of flimsy blue-tinted paper, were written in bad Italian, a translation of which would read as follows :

"NAPLES, Dec. 7th, 1867.

"*To the young Sir Tresolino :* There is bad news. You will not expect to hear from me for a week, and will not look for a letter at Gloucester at the false address. And in a week all may be lost. The brigand band of the Red Carvelli is broken up. Their secret retreats are laid waste. The Red Carvelli is condemned to die. And worst of all, for you and me, *he* has escaped. The young Inglesa is his protector. They have gone to England. Be warned. Be on your guard. I will write

to the false address by same post, and in that letter will give a plan to get rid of him for ever.

“Accept, Milord, the gracious homage of your unworthy servant,
“JACOPO PALESTRO.”

Sir Arthur read this strange letter again and again. He examined the Naples post mark, and studied the handwriting, even while he pondered upon the contents of the letter.

He comprehended, of course, that the letter had been written for the eyes of Lowder, and for his eyes alone. But he had no regret for having opened it. To the contrary, he believed that this letter, rightly studied, might help him to some conclusion in regard to the character of his supposed son.

“It is very odd !” he said to himself. “Guy is in the habit of receiving letters from this fellow at the Gloucester post-office, and to an assumed address. That must be because the Italian writes something Guy is afraid to have come here. What can it be?”

He gave considerable thought to the question, and could only come to the conclusion that these letters concerned the mystery which he was fully persuaded had originated somewhere in the past career of his supposed son.

“Guy has done something in regard to which he has to buy this Palestro’s silence,” he thought. “But what have brigands to do with my son? Can he have been their friend? And who is the *he* who has escaped? And why does his coming to England threaten evil to Guy? Is he some partner in a crime with my son? Can Guy have secretly married while abroad? What is his secret?”

The problem, as presented to Sir Arthur, was dark and difficult enough. For some time it tortured the

soul of the noble Baronet. At last, unable to bear inaction longer, he gathered up his letters and papers, dispatched Blanche's letter to her by a servant and made his way to the deeper solitude of his library.

Here again he studied the mysterious contents of the letter he had so strangely intercepted.

But, study as he would, he could not quite comprehend its sinister meaning. Not yet did a glimmering suspicion of the truth assail his soul. More than ever before, he felt an incubus gathering upon his heart and brain, and suffered with added force from a sense of coming evil. A cold dew broke out on his forehead. His form trembled. His soul was sick within him.

"How Guy has changed since the old days?" he thought wearily. "How unlike his sentiments are to those expressed in his letters! The change in him grows upon me daily and hourly. Why did I send him abroad years ago? Why did I let him remain abroad so long? I fancied that he would love my little Blanche all the better if he never saw her until he had grown to manhood. I fancied that if they met often in youth their love would be fraternal. Yet would to God they had thus met and thus regarded each other. This man, son of mine though he is, is not worthy of that tender, pure, true-hearted young soul. And she regards him as noble though erring, and feels for him a pity that leads all other emotions. She cannot forget what he has been. I cannot give her to him. And I cannot prevent their marriage, and thus blight her passionate adoration of him. What am I to do?"

He covered his face with his hands, and sat mute and motionless, as if turned to stone.

The time passed. The little French clock on the mantel-piece struck the hour of ten. Then Sir Arthur arose and looked around him with a weary, haggard face,

and with eyes whose pleasant, kindly gleam was lost in an expression so sad, so wildly questioning, as to be absolutely startling.

"I must go in to them," he said wearily. "They will wonder at my absence. When Blanche retires, I will have a talk with Guy."

He picked up the letter from the floor, restored it to its envelope, and thrust it into the breast pocket of his coat. Then he moved wearily from the room.

Crossing the wide hall, he went into the drawing-room, entering upon a scene so bright and pleasant and charming to look upon, that one who knew not his secret and his anxieties would have wondered at the strange grayish pallor that overspread his face as he gazed upon the young couple, who were sitting very near to each other.

The great wide drawing-room was all aglow with the mellow lamplight, and the dancing, flickering play of the flames in the big grate. Blanche sat at the corner of the hearth, her pretty golden head shining, her little face all alight, and yet her keen-eyed, noble-hearted guardian saw, what the false Guy did not see, a vague wistfulness and yearning in her azure eyes, a vague, unrest and dissatisfaction in the quivering smile on her lips.

The pretender sat on a low hassock at her feet. One of his hands lay on her knee clasping hers. He was looking up into her face with an unmistakable devotion. It was plain that he loved her.

Blanche looked up as her guardian entered, and flashed up at him a bright, welcoming glance. It was evident even to Sir Arthur that she was glad of his coming.

Lowder looked up also, but with an expression of

annoyance. In his own mind he anathematized Sir Arthur for his inopportune appearance.

"Where have you been all the evening, Sir Arthur?" asked Blanche, making room for him on the little sofa beside her, and withdrawing her hand from that of Lowder. "We have seen nothing of you since dinner!"

"You have missed me then?" asked the Baronet sitting down beside her.

"Missed you! Indeed we have; haven't we, Guy?"

"I cannot say that I have," said Lowder. "When I am with you, Blanche, I have no thought of any one else."

Blanche blushed so rosily, in spite of the fact that she was not pleased, that Sir Arthur's gray pallor deepened, and a keen pain shot through his heart. He turned away his face, while a sneering smile curved the lips of the false Guy.

"Guy and I have been recalling old times," said Blanche. "That seems to be a resource suitable to long winter evenings. Would you believe it, Guardy, he doesn't remember the time when the black filly ran away with me at Irby Hall, and when he saved me at risk of his own life? Is it modesty, do you think," she added gayly, "that causes him to forget a feat like that?"

"I should not think he could forget it, when the noble act so nearly cost him his life!" said the Baronet.

"And especially when he will carry the scar of it to his grave!" said Blanche, her eyes filling suddenly with tears, forgetting the present in that far past. "The doctor said he would carry that mark on his wrist, where he was cut when the filly flung him on a pile of stones after I was rescued, to his grave. Oh, Guy, when I have thought all these years of that scar made for

me—the sign of a life imperilled for my sake—you have seemed to me greater than any knight or paladin of old. You have been to me a type of a hero, the noblest, the grandest—”

“And now, how are the mighty fallen!” muttered Lowder.

Blanche uttered a half sob. The next moment, leaning over him in her old childlike, impetuous, charming way, she exclaimed :

“Guy, let me look at that scar. The doctor said you must carry it all your life ; and it seems almost as if it were my seal that I had set upon you. The sight of it might revive—”

She checked herself abruptly, blushing, and lifted his right hand ; but he snatched it from her, flushing angrily.

“The—the scar is too sacred in my sight to be exhibited,” he stammered.

“To me, Guy?”

“To any one. I am not fond of exhibiting such things. Some other time I’ll show it to you, Blanche, but not now.”

“It still exists then?” asked the Baronet, his keen eyes closely scrutinizing the flushed and perturbed face of his pretended son.

“Certainly. How can a mark like that fade out? It still exists, and is a precious scar to me when I think how I won it,” said the pretender, recovering his equanimity. “Ah, I was a hare-brained lad, Blanche. I had more hair-breadth escapes, more adventures and troubles than would have sufficed for a dozen boys. Always in some Quixotic scrape, always being involved in some fight in behalf of some smaller urchin, or some crazy tramp or persecuted individual. It’s a wonder I lived to years of manhood.”

"That is all true," said Sir Arthur. "My boy was always the champion of the weak and oppressed. But," he added, "it did not use to be like him to boast of it! But that is not the only respect in which you have changed, Guy!"

The pretender flushed again, and arose from his hassock, bestowing himself in an easy-chair in the shadow, at the opposite corner of the hearth.

"There's nothing like rivalry," he observed, with a sneer, which innocent Blanche did not perceive, but which Sir Arthur plainly felt, "and rivalry in the same pursuit, to open the eyes of a father to his son's faults! It is curious isn't it now, how the nearest relatives hate each other when their interests or passions threaten to clash!"

The false son spoke with a carelessness and apparent indifference which caused Blanche to think that he was simply indulging in a philosophical reflection without any personal application.

But Sir Arthur understood it only too well. The stab went home. He turned paler still if possible, and a stern and sorrowful look beamed in his eyes.

He comprehended that Lowder, having discovered his secret love for Blanche, meant to use it as a weapon to stab him at will. This utter lack of the commonest honor and manliness, that would have made another bury the secret deep in his own breast, seemed to Sir Arthur a baseness of which he could scarcely believe his son to be capable. That baseness cut deeper now than the sneer. For a little while he sat silent. Lowder, incensed at the barely concealed coldness of Blanche, and at her references to Guy's past, pounded the hearth-rug viciously with his heel.

At length Sir Arthur spoke, addressing his ward :

"You look tired, Blanche," he said. "Do you feel ill?"

"No, Sir Arthur," the girl answered. "I am not ill, but I am tired."

She arose, declaring her intention of retiring, and said good-night very quietly to Sir Arthur and Lowder. Both men noticed that she did not offer a kiss as formerly to the Baronet, and one of them felt the change in her with a pang.

She went out silently. Lowder arose, as if to depart also, but Sir Arthur stopped him by a stern gesture.

"Do not go yet!" he commanded, sternly. "I have some business to transact with you, Guy. It is time we came to some sort of an understanding. Sit down. I have something of importance to say to you."

Considerably surprised, but not at all alarmed, Jasper Lowder resumed his seat.

"Go on!" he said insolently. "What have you to say to me?"

CHAPTER XXI.

A STARTLING DISCOVERY.

For a few moments after the utterance of the words with which we took our leave of them, Sir Arthur Tressilian and Jasper Lowder sat in the drawing-room in silence. The Baronet did not know how to enter upon the subject which agitated his soul, and of which he had determined to speak unreservedly to the young man.

The mingled glow of lamplight and firelight fell full upon Sir Arthur's handsome face, revealing the dark lines under his eyes, and the perplexed and troubled

expression that sat upon his features. Looking at him sharply, Lowder experienced a vague alarm. He stopped beating his heels against the hearth-rug, and regarded the Baronet keenly and closely.

"You seem troubled," he observed, with affected carelessness.

"I am troubled," returned Sir Arthur briefly.

"I suppose you intend to harp upon that affair of the two thousand pounds while life lasts," cried Lowder impatiently. "If you think you will make me any better by going about with a long face, heaving deep sighs, you are mistaken. I am sorry for my fault. If you were generous, you would be contented with that confession, and suffer the matter to die out of your mind."

"It is not about that money I wish to speak to you, Guy," said Sir Arthur, his dark pale face flushing. "I have many and deep anxieties—"

"And all about me, I suppose?" demanded Lowder, in a tone of annoyance. "Or, do some of your anxieties concern Blanche?" he added significantly.

A pained expression passed over the Baronet's face, but he made no reply to this sneering question.

"The truth is," said Lowder, "that you and I have been at war since that affair of ten days since. I have expressed my sorrow a score of times. I would like to restore our old relations to each other. I would like to be again your confidential friend. In short, I would like to atone for my errors, and prove to you that I am of real sterling worth at bottom, and that my faults are but the froth that rises to the top of good wine."

"Before you can prove this to me, Guy, I must be taken into your confidence. I must know what your secret is—"

"My secret!" cried Lowder, starting.

"Yes. You need not deny that you have a secret. I

know now that the sum you paid that Italian was not to pay a gaming debt. Why did he promise repeatedly to write to you weekly? What mystery was there between you and him? Why have you bribed him to silence?"

Lowder was too much startled to reply. The Baronet, so long unsuspecting and trustful, had aroused himself at last. What would be the issue of his inquiries?

"I have no secret," stammered the usurper. "Your romantic fancies have strayed far from the truth. Palestro was only a scrivener to whom I owed a heavy gaming debt—"

"Then why do you insist upon his writing to you each week?"

Lowder could not devise a plausible answer. He turned red and pale by turns, shifted uneasily in his chair, and finally pushed himself back into the shadow, maintaining an obstinate silence.

The Baronet continued to regard him with a keen, steady, soul-searching gaze.

"And why," demanded Sir Arthur sternly, "do you have his letters come to a false address at Gloucester?"

Lowder uttered a hoarse ejaculation of dismay and consternation. A scared look came into his eyes. He seemed overwhelmed—terror-stricken. He sat for a moment as if paralyzed.

"Who—who told you?" he gasped. "It is false—I swear it is false."

Sir Arthur held up his hand in a commanding gesture.

"One question more," he said, in a voice of terrible sternness, with eyes that seemed all aglow with awful accusation. "Who is this prisoner who was in the hands of the brigand chief, the Red Carvelli—this prisoner who has escaped and come to England—"

Jasper Lowder interrupted the Baronet with a shrill,



"LET ME HEAR YOU SAY THAT YOU LOVE ME."—*See Chapter XVII.*

horrible cry that might have emanated from a soul that knows itself lost through all eternity. His livid face, his starting eyes, his convulsed features, all proclaimed that a mortal terror was upon him.

"Escaped!" he said hollowly. "Come to England! He—he is here?"

Sir Arthur was appalled at the emotion his words had aroused. The mystery enveloping his supposed son began to assume larger proportions in his eyes.

"You think he will come directly to Tressilian Court on his arrival in England, then?" the Baronet asked quickly.

Lowder put up his hands feebly, as if he expected an immediate personal attack. He cowered before Sir Arthur, while he glanced at the door as if expecting to behold a dreaded apparition.

"You have seen him?" he whispered.

"No, I have not seen him. He has not yet made his appearance at the Court."

"You—you have heard from him?"

"No, not from the mysterious person whose escape from the hands of the brigands in Italy has power to startle you into such abject terror!"

"You have had a letter from Palestro?" Lowder questioned, in a quavering voice, his only thought being that all his guilt was known, or on the point of being revealed.

Sir Arthur hesitated in his reply. Lowder waited for him to speak as a convicted criminal waits for his sentence of death from the stern lips of his judge. Presently Sir Arthur said, in a voice of stern power:

"Palestro has not written to me, Guy. I am going to deal with you frankly, and you must deal truthfully with me. I have got upon the track of your secret, and I mean to know it fully. There must be no more

secrecy, no more lying, no more subterfuge. You understand?"

"How much do you know?" asked Lowder faintly.

"I will tell you. This evening, after you left the dinner-table with Blanche, Purmton brought in the letters. There were several of them. One was for Blanche; the rest, as I supposed, for me. One of these letters was addressed 'to the young Sir Tressilian.' The address was certainly odd, but I am by no means old, and of course, I am the only baronet of the name. I was suffering from many secret perplexities, and—in short, Guy, I opened a letter that was intended for you."

Lowder breathed hard and gaspingly.

"It was from Palestro," continued the Baronet. "It is needless to say that I have read it entirely."

He took from his pocket the letter in question and gave it into Lowder's hands.

The latter snatched it eagerly, and his burning gaze ran like a swift flame over its contents. He read it twice, and then, with the calmness of an utter desperation, leaned forward and laid the letter upon the coals.

As it burned to a brown and shrivelled shred, the usurper raised his red and desperate face to the full gaze of Sir Arthur, and his eyes gleamed with defiance, as he ejaculated the single word:

"Well?"

"I demand an explanation of the contents of that letter. Again I ask of you, who is that escaped prisoner? Why do you fear his coming to England?"

The prospects of Jasper Lowder were exceedingly dark at that moment; but at heart his hope was not yet dead. The letter at the Gloucester post-office might contain better news. Surely Tressilian could not have recovered his reason. It must be, he thought, that the

English girl who had constituted herself Guy's protector, having been freed from her imprisonment with the bandits, had simply continued her journey to England, bringing Tressilian with her. The name of Jasper Lowder was fastened upon the poor imbecile. He had been frightened, and had nearly betrayed his guilt and covered himself with ruin, in his cowardly panic. He must hasten to retrieve himself in the opinion of the stern but high-souled Baronet.

These thoughts coursed through his mind in a swift-rushing torrent. The passionate alarm and desperation faded from his countenance. He busied his fertile brain in devising an explanation that should quell the suspicions of the thoroughly aroused Baronet. How was he to account plausibly for his recent terror and despair?

"I—I will explain the matter," he said, when the stern, questioning gaze of Sir Arthur, and the deep, terrible silence had become unendurable, and the necessity for his answer became pressing. "The man who has escaped from the brigands is a vile fellow—an Italian—a former acquaintance of mine. He—he hates me. He would kill me at sight."

"And why?"

"Because—because— How can I lay bare to you that chapter in my life?" cried Lowder. "You have already a clue to the truth in that matter of the gaming debt. Your life here in the country has been so peaceful, so quiet, so utterly without temptation, that you cannot make allowance for the faults of a hot-headed youth. Having plenty of money, being young and thoughtless and full of life, having no guide or tutor, or older head to think for me, is it to be wondered at that I was foolish, even wicked?"

Sir Arthur's grave features became graver and more stern.

"Go on," he said quietly.

"At Naples," continued Lowder, drawing easily upon his ready inventiveness, "I fell in with a bad set. You know my frankness and unsuspicion? I became a prey to a gang of sharpers who infested this inn of Palestro's where I stopped for some weeks. They led me on to gamble, as you know to your cost. One night—can I ever forget it?" and Lowder's voice seemed to vibrate with a passionate horror and remorse—"those Italians induced me to join them, as I had done before. I went with them to their upper room at the inn. They brought out wine and stronger drinks. I drank with them—I played. You know nothing of such a scene, father. Spare me the recital of its horrors."

He paused, shuddering, and covering his face with his hands.

"Go on!" again commanded Sir Arthur sternly.

Lowder hastened to obey.

"I was urged to drink again and again. Unused as I was to strong liquor, the brandy flew to my brain. I played recklessly. I lost a hundred pounds to an Italian—this very fellow who has escaped from the brigand's hands. I played on, and won twice the sum I had lost. My opponent sprang up, accusing me of cheating. My head was in a tumult; my blood was on fire. As quick as a flash I seized a dagger from the belt of this Palestro who was here, and stabbed my lying accuser in the face and breast. He fell, as I thought, mortally wounded."

Again Lowder paused, apparently overcome by his reminiscences, but in reality to mark the effect of his false narrative upon the Baronet. The story, as told by the usurper, had sounded terribly real. His shuddering voice, his remorseful face, his starting eyes, all would

have done credit to the cleverest actor upon the boards of the Haymarket or Drury Lane theatres.

"Imagine my horror and terror!" he resumed. "Imagine my awful despair! I hastened toward the wounded man, but he waved me back with an oath of undying hatred. I believed myself a murderer. Palestro offered to connive at my escape upon the payment of a sum of money, which I gladly gave him. His silence purchased, I fled to Sardinia. While there I had a letter from Palestro, stating that the fellow had recovered from his wound, but that he was frightfully disfigured. More than that, he had sworn an awful oath to be revenged upon me. You know how revengeful the hot-blooded Italians are. In the same letter in which Palestro informed me of my deadly peril, telling me that the man was a very sleuth-hound, and meant to kill me, the inn-keeper told me that he would have him kidnapped by brigands, and carried to the cavern of the Red Carvelli, who is, I should have said, Palestro's brother-in-law. I consented to this disposition of the man. I exchanged my fear of him for Palestro's tyranny. You know the rest."

This story, so well told, sounded plausible enough. The manner and looks of Lowder went far to confirm it. When he had concluded, he bowed his head before the Baronet as one awaiting sentence.

And still Sir Arthur made no comment.

"I do not ask for your forgiveness for my errors, father," said the usurper, with well-feigned humility. "You are so noble and upright that I have not until now dared to tell you the truth. And I would have kept silence to my death, but for your discovery of a portion of the truth. I have forfeited your respect and affection; and yet I was never more worthy of both than I am at this moment. I have outgrown my boyish

faults and errors, and am to-night a nobler and a better man for my experiences. I have disappointed you I know. Will you make my remorse deeper than it is? Will you make my life a burden to me? Or will you forgive me?"

He looked up imploringly, acting his part to such perfection that Sir Arthur's sternness and coldness began to show signs of relaxing.

"You have told me the truth—the whole truth?" the Baronet demanded, in a voice of command.

"The whole truth, sir," declared Lowder, forcing himself to meet Sir Arthur's gaze unflinchingly. "You can write to Palestro, if you doubt me. You can send a messenger to Naples. I will shrink from no test you may choose to apply."

The Baronet drew a long sigh, whether of pain or relief Lowder could not tell.

"Say no more, Guy," he said. "'Let the dead past bury its dead.' If your repentance for your faults is sincere, I will not heap reproaches upon you. As you have now thrown off all the burden upon your soul, I hope I shall see you again what you once were. Or if the frankness and open-heartedness, the bright temper and innocent gayety of disposition, are gone forever, at least be to me a son whom I can respect."

There were tears in Sir Arthur's brown eyes as he spoke these words. Lowder held out his hand in token of a complete reconciliation. The Baronet clasped it but without heartiness or spirit.

Lowder lingered some minutes to deepen the impression he had made, and then arose and withdrew, going to his room.

Sir Arthur remained in the drawing-room an hour or more longer. The heavy shadows upon his handsome

face did not lift, nor did the gloom in his dark eyes lessen.

"That story was plausible enough," he murmured "It sounded true. Why should I continue to doubt because he has deceived me before? Why is it that I am growing to loathe him—that the touch of his hand makes me shudder—that the sound of his voice jars upon me?"

He arose and paced the room wearily. In his own mind he reviewed the narrative Lowder had rehearsed to him. And then his thoughts recurred to the incident of the early evening—Lowder's refusal to exhibit his wrist to the gaze of Blanche.

"That was singular," Sir Arthur thought, recalling Lowder's agitation and annoyance. "Blanche desired very naturally to look at the scar that had been gained in rescuing her from peril, perhaps death. Why did he refuse to show it to her? The scar was declared to be indelible. Guy says that it still exists. I remember well its shape and appearance. What am I to think of his singular refusal to show it?"

He quickened his steps to an impetuous tread.

"If the scar is there, as he declares, what is the secret of his singular manner? If it is not there—"

His own words brought a strange suspicion to the Baronet's mind—a suspicion, faint and glimmering, of the actual truth. He scouted it as preposterous. He told himself he was foolish—insane. But the idea would not be dispelled. It clung to him like a hideous nightmare.

At last, weary and worn, he extinguished the drawing-room lights, and proceeded up stairs.

Once in that wide and lonely upper corridor, he hesitated, coming to a halt. Then, with some sudden impulse, he moved toward the pretender's door and

listened. The sound of heavy breathing came from within.

"He is asleep," thought the Baronet. "If that scar is on his wrist, this doubt, this uneasiness will be conquered. I must see."

He battled with himself, but he could not pass on to his chamber to spend the night in harrowing doubts which one bold step would settle forever.

"I *must* know!" he whispered anxiously, his eyes growing haggard again. "For Blanche's sake, I must resolve the doubts I dare not confess to myself."

He set down his candle on a small bracket in the hall. Then he softly opened the door of the impostor's chamber.

Lowder was in bed and soundly asleep. The light of the night without penetrated into the room through the parted curtains. A small night light burned on a table near the bed.

Sir Arthur removed his boots at the door, and softly crossed the floor and stood by the bedside. The impostor was sleeping as tranquilly as a child, a peaceful look on his fair face, a half smile on his lips.

Sir Arthur's heart warmed toward him.

"He must be mine—my own boy!" he thought, for the first time giving name and expression to the suspicions that had tortured him. "No villain could sleep like that!"

One of the sleeper's arms lay on the silken coverlet. The right arm was tossed carelessly above his head, and the loose sleeve of his night-shirt covered his wrist. With a touch as gentle as that of a woman, the Baronet pulled aside the shrouding sleeve.

The wrist lay revealed. Despite the assertion of the impostor, it was smooth and white, unmarked by a single scar, or the least trace of any injury whatever.

With one wild and agonized look, made up of horror and incredulity, the Baronet crept feebly from the room.

CHAPTER XXII.

OLLA'S ENEMY AT HAND.

Nearly three weeks had passed since the arrival at Bleak Top of Olla Rymple, Guy Tressilian and the faithful Popleys.

The short December day was at its close. The heavy twilight was shutting grayly and darkly down upon the Cheviot Hills. There was again snow in the air, and already a fine, sharp sleet, that cut the skins of exposed travellers like needle points, pervaded the atmosphere. The wind was keen and strong and fierce, and full of biting cold.

The lights were gleaming faintly from the uncurtained windows of the stone cottages forming the small hamlet of Gloamvale. The red glow of fire streamed out from the forge of the village smithy upon the stony, frozen street. A great lamp was placed in the shop window of the "general dealer's" establishment, in the midst of evergreens, sprays of holly berries and sprigs of mistletoe, all signs and tokens of the approaching Christmas. If other signs of the coming festal season were wanted, they might be found in the dolls and toys, the boxes of raisins, colored tapers, painted penny trumpets, and other novelties and dainties that thronged the window, the door-way and the counter.

The shopkeeper was standing in his doorway, his burly figure thrown into relief by the strong light behind

him. He looked anxiously up and down the slippery, wind-swept street, and was just saying to himself that he would have no customers that night, when the loud clatter of wheels was heard, and a post-chaise came down the street, drawn by two jaded horses.

"Who can that be?" muttered the dealer, in a mild surprise. "Everybody seems to be coming to Gloam-vale now-a-days."

He stepped out upon the side-walk, to further indulge his curiosity. As if his appearance had been a signal, the carriage slackened its speed, and drew up at the shopman's curbstone.

At the same moment a gentleman thrust his head out of the chaise window, and roughly ordered the driver to go on.

"It can't be done, your honor," said the driver, dismounting and coming to the carriage door. "The beasts are dead tired. I've had to beat 'em cruel the last five miles. The roads are in a terrible condition, and the wind freezes 'em. They an't got no more heart left than a pair o' chickens."

"But, see here," cried the passenger. "You *must* go on, you know. This isn't going to do at all."

"Can't help it, your honor. It would kill the beasts to climb that there mountain to-night," the driver declared doggedly. "They'd break down afore we got to the top. I'm 'sponsible for the horses, and I'm a judge of what they can bear. Two miles of that mountain travel would kill 'em in their present condition."

The passenger hastily flung open the chaise door and leaped out upon the walk. One glance at his large, portly figure, wrapped as it was in greatcoat and furs, and at his fair face, with its expression of cool disdain and overbearing haughtiness, would have been sufficient to proclaim his identity to one who had once seen him.

He was Olla's faithless guardian and relentless enemy—Mr. Devereux Gower.

From the night of Olla's flight from Palermo, he had been in active search of her. He had not discovered in what way she had fled from the island until the day after she had gone, and, as Olla had intended, he then believed that she had gone to Marseilles, on her way to England. To Marseilles he had followed as soon as possible, but he found no trace of her there. He went on to Paris—to England. He visited all her acquaintances and former friends, pursuing his inquiries. Failing to find her, he hurried back to the Continent.

A copy of *Galignani's Messenger* containing an account of the capture, near Naples, of the formidable brigand, the Red Carvelli, and his men, with mention of the release of the prisoners, giving their names, came into his hands at Paris. Believing that Olla was still at Naples, he hurried thither. He sought out the Vesuvius Inn and its mistress, gained some information, and posted back to England. By dint of close inquiry, he had learned that this lonely place among the Cheviot Hills, and upon the summit of Bleak Mountain, was a heritage of his ward, and having sought for her elsewhere in vain, he had now come to seek for her here.

Mr. Gower turned from the driver to the shopkeeper, demanding, with the air of a vastly superior being :

“How far is it to Bleak Top?”

“About three miles, sir,” the dealer replied respectfully, duly impressed with Mr. Gower's manner. “It's a zigzag sort of road, sir, winding and climbing.”

At this moment a horseman rode slowly past the shop. He was in shadow, and his cap was drawn down over his eyes. Mr. Gower glanced at him idly, but no instinct warned him that the horseman was Popley, Olla's faithful ally and servitor.

But it was Popley, and none other. He had been to the cottage of a seamstress further down the street, to procure some garments that had been making for his young mistress, and was now on his return to Bleak Top.

But though Popley was unrecognized by Mr. Gower, he did not fail to recognize the enemy of Miss Olla, as the latter stood in the full glare of the light from the shop. Betraying no agitation or excitement, however, he quietly rode on, pursuing his course along the street. When he had passed out of sight and hearing of the little group clustering in the light before the shop door, he quickened his horse's pace, hurrying homeward with his evil news.

Mr. Gower, forgetful the next instant of the passing horseman, pursued his inquiries.

"Is the road to Bleak Top broken?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. It's been broken a week or more. They were snowed in on the mountain top for more'n a week, but when the thaw came Kit Kipp broke a road—"

"Who is Kit Kipp?"

"The housekeeper's son, sir."

"Ah! Is there anybody stopping at Bleak Top—anybody besides these people who have charge of the house?"

"Yes, sir. Miss Rymple, the lady who owns the place, is there, with her servants and a sick gentleman—"

"Ah!" again breathed Mr. Gower, while a lurid glow of fierce delight lit up his sinister face, and sparkled evilly in his sinister eyes.

He turned away his head, that the shopkeeper might not witness his emotion. His search had led him to success at last.

"The road being broken," he said, in a tone of eager

impatience, "we will of course go on. I must reach Bleak Top to-night. I won't mind a crown or so as a gift, at the end of the journey. So up to your box, driver. We must get on!"

The driver shook his head sullenly, lashing his feet with his whip.

"I can't do it, sir!" he exclaimed. "Not twenty crowns, nor twenty suvrins would tempt me. The beasts 'll drop afore the first mile is ended. The bargain was to Gloamvale, and I can't take you no further to-night. I must find a place to put up. If you say go on, in the morning, go on it is. But not sooner!"

With this dictum, he mounted his box and sat upon it the picture of dogged determination.

Mr. Gower looked at the horses. He saw at a glance that they were unfit for further use, and he reluctantly acquiesced in the necessities of the case.

"Put up your horses then!" he exclaimed. "I will find a conveyance to take me to Bleak Top."

The driver flourished his whip, and his jaded beasts moved slowly on in the sleet and darkness, the shopkeeper telling him where to go.

"Come this way, sir," said the dealer, going toward his shop. "I can give you lodgings for the night—"

"Didn't you just hear me say I should procure a conveyance and go on?" interposed Mr. Gower sharply, as he followed the dealer into the shop.

"But no conveyance can't be had for love or money," returned the shopkeeper blankly. "What few horses there are at Gloamvale are farm horses that work all day, and are not fit to travel at night. Besides, the night is bad—"

Mr. Gower interrupted the man with an impatient exclamation.

"Are you sure there are no horses to be had?" he exclaimed. "I will pay any price—"

The shopkeeper repeated his assertion. He was startled the next moment by the volley of oaths that came from the lips of the aristocratic stranger.

"If no horses are to be had, I will walk to the mountain summit!" he cried. "I have imperative business at Bleak Top, and must be there to-night."

He called for a glass of brandy, which was procured from an inner room where the shopkeeper's family lived. He drank the fiery liquid, tossed a shilling on the counter, and despite the earnest entreaties of the shopkeeper, stalked out of the establishment and set upon his journey to Bleak Top.

"Tracked!" he muttered jubilantly, as he crossed the stream of light before the door of the smithy, and strode on into the gloom and sleet. "She is tracked again! I shall find her at Bleak Top, with her paragon of idiots. She shall rue the day she first tried to outwit me. Oh, the little tantalizing, saucy beauty! Despite her coldness and scorn, and the trouble she has caused me, I love her still. And it may be as well that she has come to this lonely spot. Krigger will come on to-morrow, and I will turn my lady's refuge into a prison! We shall see which is to win the game—she or I?"

He hurried on, gathering his garments closer. The sleet cut his face; the wind pierced to his very bones. The footing was insecure and difficult, but, buoyed up by his two great passions, love and revenge, Mr. Gower boldly breasted the storm.

He began the ascent of the lonely mountain. Below him gleamed the lights of Gloamvale. He could see nothing on either side of him, or in advance save the mist of blinding sleet.

"A nasty night!" he muttered, plodding onward.

"If my impatience would have allowed me to wait till morning, it might have been better. How surprised Olla will be to see me ! I can see now her surprise and terror. Ha ! she will find I am not quite the man she imagined !"

Pursuing his upward course steadily, staggering into an occasional drift, now pitching forward, now slipping backward, and all the time battling with the wind, he made but slow progress. He muttered frequent curses, and his wrath against his runaway ward grew fierce and hot, as he struggled with the difficulties of his path.

"Fool that I am !" he ejaculated. "I should have brought a lantern with me. Why did not that shop-keeper tell me that this is the worst road in all Christendom ? I will not turn back if the alternative is to perish in this cursed storm. Ah ! there's a light now—the light of a farm-house. It surely can't be that I have gotten up to Bleak Top ?"

The light emanated from a house window at a little distance upon his right. It was in fact the light of Hester Lowder's lamp, issuing from the window of the parlor of Gloam Fell.

Mr. Gower made for the light, determined to secure rest and warmth before proceeding further. He found the small gate in the wall, and entered the garden of Gloam Fell, making for the house. As he came near, he peeped in at the parlor window.

It was no picture of home joys that his eyes rested upon.

In the glow of the firelight and lamplight, Hester Lowder was sitting. Her child lay on her knees, quiet—strangely quiet. No baby laughter was sounding in the room ; no baby gambols were making the mother's heart glad.

He could not see the face of the young mother, but

her attitude was one of utter despair. Her meek, girlish head drooped low toward her boy. She seemed to be listening to learn if the child still breathed.

Impressed by the scene, by the mute anguish and despair expressed by Hester's figure, Mr. Gower stole away from the window, and went around to the rear entrance, where he knocked loudly.

Mrs. Tooker, the former tenant of the farm-house, gave him admittance into her neat, warm kitchen.

"We've been expecting you this long time," she exclaimed. "Oh, it's not the doctor!"

"No, Madame, I am no doctor, only a traveller who would like to warm himself at your fire," returned Mr. Gower, advancing to the fireplace. "Is any one ill in the house?"

"Only the baby, sir, Mrs. Blees' baby," answered Mrs. Tooker, when she had compelled the visitor to repeat his question twice. "You must excuse me, sir. I am a little hard of hearing. Won't you sit down?"

She pushed a chair toward Mr. Gower, who took possession of it, and put his chilled, half frozen feet to the genial blaze.

"It must be a terrible night out!" said Mrs. Tooker uneasily, going to the window. "I do wish the doctor would come. I am afraid the child will die. And if little Jasper dies, his mother will die too, in my opinion."

"What did you say the name was? Who did you call Jasper?" asked Mr. Gower in his highest tones.

"The child, sir; Mrs. Blees' baby. He is named Jasper after his pa," explained Mrs. Tooker, who, being uneasy and troubled, was unusually garrulous, as if hoping to find comfort in the very expression of her fears. "We've sent for the doctor and telegraphed for Mr. Blees, but no one's come yet. And indeed, we

couldn't expect the baby's pa before to-morrow, as he lives down Gloucester way. Which way were you going, sir?"

"To Bleak Top!"

"They've a sight of company there now-a-days, I should say," observed Mrs. Tooker. "Going to spend Christmas, I suppose. Well, some can dance and be glad, and some can cry and suffer, like the poor thing in yonder. Her husband hasn't been to see her since she came. I don't know but I ought to telegraph to Mr. Tressilian, whose agent brought her here—"

"Mr. Tressilian?" repeated Mr. Gower, who had long since learned that Guy Tressilian had been the employer of Jasper Lowder. He had examined the list of passengers of the steamer on the day the false Tressilian left Palermo for Marseilles, and had easily identified the "Sir Tresolino" of the Vicinis with Guy Tressilian.

"Yes. Mr. Tressilian owns this place," said Mrs. Tooker restlessly, continuing her watch from the window. Mrs. Blees is the wife of a friend of his."

"Of a friend named Jasper?" muttered Gower. "A singular coincidence!"

He meditated upon it, wondering if he had not stumbled upon a mystery. The doctor arrived presently, with the lad who had been sent for him, and went into the parlor, as soon as he was sufficiently warmed. He came out a few minutes later with a very grave countenance.

"You did not send for me soon enough," he said, addressing himself to Mr. Gower. "The child cannot live until morning. It is a case of malignant sore throat."

"I have no personal interest in the matter, sir," said Mr. Gower haughtily. "Address yourself to this good woman, if you please."

The doctor, thus rebuffed, addressed himself to Mrs. Tooker of whom he was an old acquaintance.

Mr. Gower was by this time both warmed and refreshed, and made an effort to procure a conveyance of some sort to Bleak Top. Mrs. Tooker's horse was too tired, and she refused to lend him. The doctor, on account of the rebuff he had received from the supercilious stranger, declined to give any aid in the matter, and announced his intention of remaining all night at Gloam Fell.

"You had better do the same, sir," said Mrs. Tooker hospitably. "I can give you a bed. The night is too severe for a dog to be out in, let alone a man. You can easily go on in the morning." Mr. Gower went out upon the porch, but a minute's experience of the bitter cold decided him to remain until morning. He came in again, announcing his intention of remaining. A bed was prepared for him, and he retired to it; but not to sleep.

For, an hour later, as the drowsiness began to creep over him, the shrill, wailing cry of a woman in anguish smote the still night air, and he knew that the baby down stairs was dead.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE SKY BRIGHTENING.

While the shadow of death was hovering over the lonely old farm-house of Gloam Fell—while Mr. Gower, scarcely two miles distant from his refractory young ward, was building his plans to make her his prisoner on the morrow—a scene that promised ill to the faithless guardian's schemes was transpiring at Bleak Top.

Once more we invite the attention of the reader to the double drawing-room of the isolated mountain house, with its low ceiling, its ancient furniture, its worn carpet, its flowing muslin curtains, its magnificent wood fire, and its general aspect of home comfort. A table, with easy-chairs on either side of it, was drawn up near to the glowing hearth, and upon this table stood a large globe lamp, whose mellow light was shaded by a painted screen. Around the lamp was a litter of books, magazines and papers, none of them of very recent date.

The front drawing-room had but a single occupant, our bright, brave, noble Olla. She was standing at one of the windows, one slender hand parting the curtains as she looked out into the sleety, stormy night. There was no shadow on the beautiful face, no trouble expressed in the clear, radiant eyes, no drooping of the slender upright figure. It seemed indeed as if Happiness, which had so long passed her by, had been touched at last by her fortitude and bravery, and was beginning to brighten her lonely life.

The folding doors of the double room were open, and in the inner drawing-room, before the fire, good Mrs. Popley sat dozing.

But Olla had forgotten the near proximity of her faithful old attendant. She was wrapt in thought, and did not even start when the hall door opened, and some one entered the room.

The new-comer was Guy Tressilian.

Three weeks of complete rest, of tender care and nursing, had completely transformed him from the apparently dying invalid to his olden self, as he had been in his best days. It is true that he was still pale and somewhat thin, but the old fire was kindled in his blue, fearless, sunny eyes ; the old grave smile sat on

his lips ; and the old spirit and intellect were enthroned on his noble features. His tawny hair was flung back from his forehead, and his tangled flossy beard had given place to a curling mustache, which well became his patrician face.

He approached Olla, and laid his hand on hers. The young girl started then, and blushed and smiled her welcome.

"What do you see out in the gloomy night, Olla?" asked Tressilian. "Or are you only thinking?"

Olla dropped the curtain, answering, while her sunny face unconsciously clouded :

"Yes, I was thinking, and of you ! It is time you left us, Guy. You are well again, and you ought to go home !"

"I have been thinking the same thing, Olla," returned Tressilian gravely. "I am well, as you say. To-morrow evening will be Christmas eve. There used to be great festivities at Tressilian Court in my boyhood. I have a fancy to arrive at home on Christmas morning. What a surprise my coming will be to father and Blanche ! What a surprise it will be to Jasper Lowder !"

"Yes—yes," said Olla, in a voice that would tremble, in spite of her efforts to keep it steady and calm. "You must go, Guy. When I think of your father being imposed upon by his pretended son—this Jasper Lowder—it seems as if you had done wrong to remain here so long. You might at least have written—"

"No, no, Olla. I want to confront Lowder in his new estate. I want to see how he acts the part of Guy Tressilian. I want to know from my own observation if he has won my father's heart from me. In short, I choose to make my appearance at Tressilian Court as startling as possible. It is true that I could have gone away a

week ago, but I had a motive in remaining. Can you guess what it is, Olla?"

The young girl faltered a negative.

"You and I, Olla, have had unusual opportunities for studying each other," said Tressilian, with an eager earnestness. "These three weeks we have been shut up together at Bleak Top are more than equivalent to three years of ordinary society intercourse. Besides, Olla, you have known me much longer than the brief period I have mentioned. You have known me in my poorest estate. It is to you I owe what I am to-day. But for you I should be a beggar—an idiot—in Sicily, this night," and his voice suddenly trembled. "But for you, Olla, my intellect would have been paralyzed forever, my father would never have known my fate, and no human heart would have mourned for me. I owe to your sublime devotion everything—life, health, and what is dearer than either, my intellect. God knows I can never repay the debt."

"You have no need to be so grateful," Olla murmured, sinking upon the sofa, her sweet face growing very white. "I am repaid in seeing you as you are, Guy."

"I am grateful, Olla," replied Tressilian, with a passionate utterance. "A lifetime of devotion to you could not show forth my gratitude. But it is not simple gratitude I feel for you. Your matchless devotion; your gentle, tender care of me; your refusal to abandon me in your worst straits; your grand and noble spirit; your glorious soul—all these have called forth in me a feeling deeper than gratitude. Olla"—and his low, passionate voice thrilled to the girl's soul—"I love you! I love you! Can you love him whom you have rescued from a living death? Will you make happy the life you have saved?"

He waited in a great doubt and anxiety for her reply.

The fear was strong upon him that her regard for him was one of simple kindness and benevolence.

"Speak, Olla!" he said tremulously, as she did not answer. "I have waited here that I might try to win your heart. I want to take you to Tressilian Court with me as my betrothed wife. Will you go, Olla?"

"You have said that it was your father's wish that you should marry his ward, Guy."

"Such was his wish, Olla, if Blanche and I could love each other, but he did not desire to force our inclinations. I have no heart to give Blanche. If you refuse me, I shall never marry her; nor would she accept me, knowing that I love another. Let no thought of Blanche come between us, Olla. In any case, she can never be more to me than a sister. If you will be my wife, Olla, I will promise you that my father and Blanche shall both give you the tender, loving welcome you deserve. You will not send me away to-morrow and alone?"

His voice trembled with impassioned eagerness. His eyes glowed with a love so pure, so strong, so keen, so passionate, that the young girl could not meet his gaze. Her sweet eyes hid themselves under their white and tremulous lids; the bright carmine deepened in her cheeks; and she drooped her face, that her young lover might not read its tell-tale expression.

"Speak, Olla!" he urged, in an agony of hope and fear. "The life you have saved will be valueless without you. Say that you will be mine!"

Olla shyly whispered the word he longed to hear, so shyly that only a lover's ear could have caught the murmur. Tressilian drew her to his heart in a rapturous silence. And thus they were betrothed.

They were sitting in a wrapt silence, broken only by the sound of Mrs. Popley's heavy breathing in the next

room, when steps were heard in the hall, and a knock sounded upon the door.

Olla arose from her lover's side hastily, just as Popley entered the room. His face showed an inward perturbation which his young mistress was not slow to mark.

"What is the matter, Popley," she asked. "Have you been to Gloamvale?"

"Yes, Miss Olla," returned Popley respectfully. "I went to the village and did your errand. Mrs. Kipp has taken the parcel to your room. I—I have bad news for you, Miss Olla."

"Bad news?"

"Yes, Miss Olla. As I was riding back through the street of Gloamvale, I saw a po'shay before the door of the general dealer's, and standing on the sidewalk, in the full light from the shop was Mr. Gower—"

Olla clasped her hands together, the happy glow fading from her face.

"He has tracked me, then? O Heaven!" she said shudderingly.

"His horses were dead tired," said Popley, "and were not fit to come on. I think he will stop at Gloamvale to-night, and come on to Beak Top in the morning. It's a nasty night to be out in."

"It is well that we are warned in time," cried Olla. "See that every door and window is secure. Give no one admittance to-night, Popley. We must be on our guard."

Popley bowed assent, and retired to do her bidding.

Olla turned toward her lover, still with clasped hands, and with a face whose piteous look and deadly pallor told Tressilian how great a shock the news of Gower's pursuit was to her.

"Oh, Guy," she said, "I have felt so safe and secure

here ! What shall I do ? Mr. Gower is my guardian, and can compel me to go with him. Or, he may choose to shut me up here at Bleak Top. He is so terrible, so cruel, so utterly unscrupulous. I have escaped him twice, and I would rather face an uncaged tiger than to face him. My courage seems to give way at last. There is no time to telegraph to Sir Windham Winn. I feel utterly driven at bay at last."

"You have given me the right to protect you, Olla," exclaimed Tressilian, gently supporting her slight and trembling figure. "I will take care of you—"

"But you don't know Devereux Gower !" breathed Olla despairingly. "He will not let me go home with you. He will send you away from Bleak Top, and before you can return to me with aid, he will have transported me to some spot where you can never find me. He loves me in his tigerish way, Guy, and he will never cease to persecute me until I am forever beyond his reach."

"Then you must be put beyond his reach immediately," cried Tressilian, smiling, yet earnest. "I don't know what the law is between guardian and ward. Of course you can appeal to the law, but law's delays are proverbial ; and while courts are disputing, Mr. Gower will persecute you until your life becomes a burden. I can see a way out of all this trouble. Olla, dear Olla, you have promised to go with me to Tressilian Court as my promised wife. Go with me as my wife."

"Your wife ?"

"Yes, darling. Don't look so frightened. Prove your love and trust in me by giving me the right to protect you from this villain. Marry me to-morrow morning, and give me a husband's right to protect you."

Olla looked startled and bewildered.

"This is so sudden !" she faltered, flushing and paling.

"We have no special license—no banns have been said. It is impossible."

"Not so, darling. We are on the Scottish border. A few miles ride will bring us to a Scottish hamlet, where we can be married. There are two horses in the stable. We can leave Bleak Top at daybreak, and ride down the mountain side in quest of a parson ; and when Mr. Gower arrives at Bleak Top, we will endeavor to be here to meet him. Say that you consent, Olla, to this hurried marriage."

"But your father, Guy !"

"He has only to look in your face to be delighted with our promptness, Olla. He has only to hear our story to take you to his heart and bless you.

But Olla still hesitated. Guy pleaded his cause with all the passionate energy of an ardent lover. The young girl's desperate peril at the hands of Mr. Gower was, however, his strongest argument. He urged that he could protect her efficiently only as her husband.

The result of his pleadings can be foreseen. With her love for him and her fear of Mr. Gower's enmity and pursuit, Olla was driven at last into a shy consent.

Tressilian gathered his young betrothed in his arms in a rapturous joy.

"The life you have saved shall be devoted to you, my darling !" he said, and his voice trembled with emotion. "You shall never regret this step, Olla. No shadow of grief or harm shall ever rest upon you if I can prevent it."

He bowed his handsome, tawny head to her's and a tear dropped upon her forehead close beside the kiss he gave her.

We will not dwell upon the solemn sweetness and holy joy of the lovers' interview. Olla had grown to love him whom she had saved with all the fervor of her

glowing soul. It was a repetition of the old fable, with some variation. Her love had endowed the beautiful statue with a soul, and she felt that he belonged peculiarly to her. His glances had power to bring the blushes to her cheeks, and to stir her heart with a strange and subtle thrilling. And Guy's love for her, so keen, strong and passionate, was full of a tender and holy reverence for her which no time could dim, nothing efface.

For a long time they sat in loving communion, saying little, but lovers' silence is full of speech.

They were aroused at last by the awakening of Mrs. Popley in the inner-room. Tressilian called to her, and the faithful old attendant obeyed his summons.

"I have news for you, Mrs. Popley," said Guy, with his old bright smile. "Your son has returned from Gloamvale, and reports having seen Mr. Gower there—"

Mrs. Popley uttered a cry of dismay.

"And as Miss Olla is in great danger," continued Tressilian, "Miss Olla and I have concluded to slip over the border in the morning and get married. In the afternoon we shall set out for Gloucester, as I want to introduce my bride to my father at Tressilian Court on Christmas morning."

Mrs. Popley's amazement and joy may be imagined.

When both had somewhat subsided, and the good woman had regained her calmness, Tressilian touched the bell. Popley answered the call, and the Baronet's son requested also the attendance of Mrs. Kipp and the bashful Christopher.

The small household was soon gathered in the drawing-room. Tressilian informed his auditors of Mr. Gower's proximity, and of his own plan to defeat the schemes of the faithless guardian. He ordered the horses to be saddled at daybreak for the intended excursion, and gathered from Mrs. Kipp the distance to the

nearest Scottish hamlet, with full particulars and directions for the journey.

The worthy servitors were loud in their expressions of joy at the prospective defeat of Mr. Gower, and loud in their congratulations to the young pair. They presently retired to talk over the matter below stairs, and the lovers were left to themselves. Half an hour later, the inmates of Bleak Top had retired to their several beds, but it is doubtful if Tressilian or Olla slept that night.

CHAPTER XXIV.

JOINED TOGETHER.

The morning subsequent to the betrothal of Olla Rymple and Guy Tressilian was in fine contrast to the storm and gloom of the preceding night. The fierce wind had died out; the air was unusually mild for the season; and the sky was cloudless—a fine omen for the lovers.

Soon after daybreak, while the morning twilight yet lingered in soft gray shadows over the valley at the foot of Bleak Mountain, completely blotting out the hamlet of Gloamvale from the view of the dwellers at Bleak Top, the two rough farm-horses, properly saddled, were brought around to the horse-block of the lonely old mountain house.

The lovers were at breakfast, eating by lamplight, but a few minutes later Guy Tressilian made his appearance. He was well attired; and there was a glow on his face and a radiance in his blue, fearless

eyes, that declared that this was, as it should be, the happiest morning of his life.

Olla presently joined her lover. She had improvised a riding-habit, and wore her seal skin jacket and little seal-skin cap. But, although she did not wear the traditional bridal costume, surely no bride ever looked fairer than this lovely, noble, blushing girl.

Tressilian assisted her into her saddle, and then mounted the horse assigned him.

The small household gathered on the steps, the two men with smiles, the two women with tears.

"It's no way for our Miss Olla to be married," sighed Mrs. Popley. "She should have a bridal robe and a vail, and—"

"She shall have all the bridal glories to-morrow, at Tressilian Court, Mrs. Popley," interposed Tressilian, smiling.

"And we'll get up a wedding breakfast for her against her return this morning," declared Mrs. Kipp. "We'll do what we can, Mrs. Popley, and mortal can't do more!"

This view of the case silenced good Mrs. Popley, and soon, amid a chorus of kindly wishes from their humble friends, the young lovers set out upon their fateful journey.

As a road led down one side of Bleak Mountain, conducting to Gloamvale, so a continuation of the same road led down the opposite side of the mountain, and over the Scottish frontier, conducting to a small Scottish hamlet, some ten miles distant from Bleak Top, and three miles beyond the border.

To this hamlet the lovers were bound.

They rode down the mountain side, over a road that was rugged and bad, as might have been expected at that season; but the horses were sure-footed and

inured to mountain travel, and did not appear to mind their precarious footing. They passed fields covered with snow, and now and then a great snowdrift bordered their road-way.

"It is easy to see that we are on the northern side of the mountain," observed Olla. "On the south side the roads are in comparatively tolerable condition."

"So much the better for us, Olla," returned Tressilian, "as we shall have to proceed to Alnwick to catch the night train to Gloucester. We shall have to make a night journey of our return to Tressilian Court."

The circuitous road down the northern side of Bleak Mountain comprised some two miles or more of hard travel, but the road was by no means level or pleasant even after the travellers had left the mountain side. The snow still lay in patches; the ground was frozen hard; there were gullies and mountain streams to traverse, and one or two bridges were found to be in a dangerous condition. But the lovers paid no heed to discomforts and dangers. They were too thoroughly happy to care whether their progress were slow or fast.

Yet when once they were over the border and upon Scottish soil, both breathed more freely. It seemed as if one barrier between them and Mr. Gower had been erected already.

It was about half past eight o'clock, and the sun was shining palely from the midst of dull gray clouds, when the young couple rode into the stony streets of the little Scottish hamlet of Dunmuir.

Like Gloamvale over the border, Dunmuir was but a cluster of stone cottages of primitive design; but as a whole, the hamlet had a picturesque aspect, due, perhaps, to the steep roofs, the pert gables, the low doorways and quaint windows. None of the dwellings were

elevated more than one step above the street, and most of the thresholds were on a level with the ill-paved sidewalk. As at Gloamvale, there was a rude smithy and a general dealer's shop, but the hamlet was too small and too seldom visited by travellers to afford an inn.

At the further end of the street was the little stone church, guiltless of spire or bell, and in its shadow, in the midst of a gloomy yew-shaded garden, was the old, steep-roofed ivy-grown manse.

"There is the Mecca of our wanderings," said Guy Tressilian, indicating the church. "A few minutes will bring us to it."

They rode up the street, the horses' hoofs clattering loudly upon the stones. Visitors at Dunmuir were not frequent, as was evident by the faces that thronged the windows and doors as the young couple rode by. Presently they arrived at the garden gate of the manse, and dismounted. Tressilian secured the horses to a couple of wooden posts, and giving Olla his arm, conducted her to the manse door, upon which he knocked loudly.

The minister's wife, an elderly, round-faced lady, wearing a cap, gave them admittance. Seeming to comprehend the errand of the young pair, she smilingly invited them into the prim manse parlor, and summoned her husband.

The minister, Mr. McDougal, a gray-haired student-like personage, with a stoop in his broad shoulders, made his appearance. Tressilian introduced Olla and himself, and stated his errand.

Mrs. McDougal was all sympathy at once, and her husband interposed no objections to performing the marriage ceremony for these young strangers.

"You are in haste, you say?" the minister said, in a mild, paternal voice. "Would you like to be married in the church?"

"I should prefer it," said Olla, blushing.

"I will open the church," said Mrs. McDougal, taking down a massive key from the wall. "You can follow soon with the young couple, Donald."

She went out, crossing the garden, and entering the church at its rear door

A few minutes later, Mr. McDougal conducted the bridal pair by the same route into the church.

It was a very plain church interior, and very quaint. There was no stained glass, no carved altar, no stately organ. The windows were fitted with small colorless panes; the walls were simply whitewashed; and the tall-backed, square pews and the sounding-board seemed to belong to a past generation.

To Olla's dismay, the front church-door had been thrown open, and a dozen villagers had entered the house, eagerly intent upon witnessing the ceremony. The blacksmith in his shirt sleeves, the shopkeeper, several laborers and a few women made up the small assemblage.

The minister ascended to his plain desk, and Olla Rymple and Guy Tressilian took their places before him, the motherly Mrs. McDougal stationing herself at Olla's side to encourage the trembling girl.

The brief service of the Presbyterian church was soon over. The words were spoken that joined Olla and Guy together, to be no more separated while life should last.

"I pronounce you man and wife," concluded Mr. McDougal, his solemn voice ringing through the little church; "and whom God has joined together, let not man put asunder! Let us pray."

Then followed a brief and simple prayer for the future of the young husband and wife.

At its close, Mr. McDougal came down from his desk

and kissed the lovely young bride, and shook hands with the groom. Mrs. McDougal followed her husband's example; after which the simple, honest villagers thronged about the pair, offering their congratulations.

Mr. McDougal retired into the vestry and wrote out a marriage certificate, which he brought out into the church for the signature of witnesses. Mrs. McDougal, the blacksmith, the shopkeeper and two women appended their names. The minister then conducted the new-married pair back to the manse, and entertained them with gooseberry wine and cakes.

Tressilian, who had found some thirty pounds in the purse of Jasper Lowder, pressed two-thirds of the amount upon the surprised and delighted minister, and at nine o'clock the young couple remounted, and started upon their return to Bleak Top.

Some two hours later, they alighted at the horse-block of the isolated mountain house. The Popleys and the Kipps ran out to meet them, every face aglow.

Tressilian assisted his young bride to alight, and led her to Mrs. Popley, saying, with a smile:

"Mrs. Popley, allow me to introduce to you my bride, Mrs. Guy Tressilian."

A cry of joy went up from the hearts of the faithful old friends and servitors of Olla. The young couple were overwhelmed with congratulations.

"Mr. Gower hasn't come yet," exclaimed Mrs. Popley, as Christopher Kipp hurried the horses to the stable. "The wedding breakfast is ready. Mr. Gower can come just as soon as he pleases. We are ready for him."

Olla made her escape to her own room, and donned her brown travelling dress. Presently she descended to the drawing-room, where Tressilian was alone, awaiting her.

He was standing by the hearth, but turned abruptly

toward her as she came in shyly and blushing, and held out his arms to her, his handsome face radiant with a joy beyond all power of expression.

"My bride! My wife!" he whispered, as her little, noble head lay on his breast. "No trouble can come to you now, while I have power to ward it off. A lifetime of tenderness and love shall be your reward for your matchless devotion!"

They were standing thus when Popley knocked loudly upon the door, announcing the wedding breakfast.

Arm in arm the pair proceeded to the dining-room.

The table, considering the limited time and materials at the disposal of Mrs. Popley and Mrs. Kipp, presented a very festal appearance. It was adorned with wreaths and vases of evergreen, whose spicy odor pervaded the room. There was no bride-cake, as Mrs. Popley loudly lamented, but there were other varieties of cake, and, what Olla and Guy better appreciated after their ride, roasted game, fried chickens, hot bread, coffee and tea, and hot mulled wine, well spiced.

The bridal couple praised the feast, and proceeded to do justice to it in a manner that delighted their attendants.

They were still lingering at the table when a thundering knock sounded upon the front door. Popley turned pale and hurried away. He presently returned, saying:

"Mr. Gower has arrived, Miss Olla. He is in the drawing-room, and demands to see you immediately."

"We will see him," said Tressilian. "Popley, have the horses harnessed in an hour, to convey us on our journey. We will procure a change of horses and vehicle at Alnham, and Kipp can bring these home."

He arose quietly, as did Olla, who took his arm, and the pair proceeded to the drawing-room.

Mr. Gower was pacing the room after the manner of

a caged bear. As Olla and Guy entered, he stopped and faced them, with a triumphal sneer on his sensual lips

"So I have found you, have I?" he demanded, with an air of exultation. "You evaded me well that second time at Palermo, Olla, but you find that I am not long outwitted. Why don't you speak? Does my appearance strike you dumb?"

"You will be careful how you address this lady, sir!" said Tressilian haughtily. "A more respectful tone will conduce to your benefit."

Mr. Gower started, and stared at the Baronet's son.

The change in Tressilian since he last saw him struck him at once. The noble face, aglow with intellect, seemed to have little in common with the sad, vacant countenance he so well remembered.

"Ha!" he ejaculated. "Is this your idiot, Olla? What—who—"

"When you saw me last, I was under a cloud," said Tressilian, with haughty sternness. "Since my return to England—thanks to Olla—I have been under surgical care, and have recovered my senses completely."

"Indeed!" cried Gower, a look of rage and chagrin crossing his amazed countenance. "Your mind is restored! Why, Doctor Spezzo said your restoration was impossible. I suppose you are aware that I am this young lady's guardian. As such, I order you to loose your hold upon her immediately. Olla, are you so lost to self-respect as to cling to this fellow? I shall be compelled to exercise my rightful authority—"

"All that is over now," interposed Tressilian calmly. "I am this young lady's guardian now."

"You her guardian! By what right?"

"The right of a husband!" said Tressilian composedly and sternly. "We were married this morning over the border, at the Scottish hamlet of Dunmuir!"

Gower uttered a hoarse cry of rage, caught at the air blindly, and staggered to the nearest chair.

"Married!" he gasped. "Married!"

"Yes. Would you like to see the certificate in proof of my assertion? If so, here it is!"

Tressilian took the slip of paper from his pocket and exhibited it to Gower. The latter glanced it over and let it fall to the floor. The young bridegroom picked it up, restoring it to his person.

"Married!" repeated Gower hollowly. "It's all up, then? Oh, if I could but have come on to Bleak Top last night! If I could but have got a horse earlier this morning! Too late! Too late!"

"Yes, it is too late for you to talk of love to Olla," said Tressilian. "The time for all that—for your persecutions of your young ward—for your plans to force her into a hateful marriage with yourself—the time for these is past for ever. We have admitted you into the house this morning that you might comprehend your utter defeat. We leave the place within an hour. You will oblige us by going now."

Mr. Gower lifted his haggard face, now flushing with rage and defiance.

"One moment, Mr. Jasper Lowder," he said, in a hard and bitter voice. "Before you order me out of your house, let me tell you who I am. But first let me tell Miss Olla whom she has married. Your noble bridegroom, Mrs. Lowder, is a beggar, a wretched, penniless fellow, whom you will be obliged to support throughout the term of his natural life—provided you decide to cling to him. There is a young woman in the neighborhood, however, who is now wailing over her dead child, who has a prior claim to your husband by virtue of a marriage abroad. What have you to say to that?"

"That it is false, like most of your statements," replied Olla scornfully.

"You think so? You would not be my wife—how will you like to be my daughter-in-law, the wife of my bigamist son? For Jasper Lowder, your handsome bridegroom, is my unacknowledged son, Madam. The relationship will do him little good, however, let me tell you both, for I will never publicly acknowledge him, nor will I ever give him one penny of my money. I shall leave to you two women—you Olla, and the first wife—the settlement of your claims upon him, unless you choose to appeal to the law to punish your gay Lothario for bigamy. But," he added, "if you begin to shrink from the villain you have wedded, I am willing to befriend you still."

To this tirade Tressilian listened with keen attention, light breaking in upon his mind, as he remembered the story Lowder had told him upon the deck of the Sardinian vessel, on that stormy night when the two young men were first introduced to our readers.

"So you are Mr. 'Devereux' Gower, the father of Jasper Lowder!" he exclaimed. "I have heard of you before. Your son, Mr. Gower, is at Tressilian Court, in Gloucestershire, under an assumed identity. My name is Guy Tressilian!"

Mr. Gower repeated the name in an amazement.

"You are not Jasper Lowder?" he said faintly, with an expression of utter stupefaction.

"I have not that infamy. I am the son of Sir Arthur Tressilian. Your son, Mr. Gower, is at Tressilian Court in my name. He believes me an imbecile, and has seized upon my name and place, making them his own. Mrs. Tressilian and I leave for the Court immediately, and I shall have the pleasure of confronting

Mr. Jasper Lowder Gower in my father's presence, and exposing him as he deserves."

For a few moments Mr. Gower sat in silence, the bitterness of his unexpected defeat weighing upon his soul with a crushing force. Olla was forever beyond his reach. Jasper Lowder was in danger of the law, and should those whom he had so foully wronged prosecute him as he deserved, the penalty for his wrong-doing would not be light. In the event of Lowder's trial, since Mr. Gower had proclaimed himself Lowder's father, the name of Devereux Gower would be stained with infamy and disgrace.

After a while the discomfited villain looked up with haggard, restless eyes, and said :

"Olla, if you will forget the past, I will. The world need not know our private troubles. And as to Lowder— I am going with you to Tressilian Court. I have a curiosity to see the fellow, and I wish to be on hand when he is disposed of."

Olla and Guy made no objection to this resolve, and half an hour later, when the young bridal pair, with the faithful Popleys, quitted Bleak Top, starting on their journey, Devereux Gower followed them on horseback. At Alnham, Tressilian procured a post-chaise, sending back the Bleak Top vehicle in charge of Kipp, and continued his journey, with his bride, to Alnwick, from which town he set out by train for Gloucester. Mr. Gower took a place in the next compartment; and in the same train, arriving at Alnwick station at the last moment, was poor, heart-broken Hester Lowder!

Truly that night train steaming southward was bearing confusion to Jasper Lowder!



CHAPTER XXV.

A TERRIBLE UNDOING.

It was Christmas morning—bright, clear and frosty, with keen, crisp air, and cool, wintry sunshine. Nature had done her best to give England a “Merry Christmas,” and all over the land the Christmas chimes were ringing, and rich and poor were making merry in honor of the great festival of the year.

It had been from time immemorial the custom at Tressilian Court to celebrate Christmas-day, and, although the hearts of Sir Arthur and Blanche were heavy and sorrowful, they were not willing to depart entirely from the time-honored custom.

No guests had been invited to the Court, but liberal gifts had been sent to the poor of Ardleigh, and Blanche had adorned the dining-room with wreaths, mottoes, and designs of evergreens, in the midst of whose spicy verdure holly berries glowed like tiny balls of fire. An appropriate dinner, including the necessary Christmas plum-pudding had been ordered, and here ended all preparations in honor of the day at Tressilian Court.

At about nine o'clock on this Christmas morning, a fly from Gloucester drove into the court-yard of the Tressilian Arms at Ardleigh, and a young woman,

attired in black, her face shrouded by a heavy mourning vail, alighted and entered the inn.

This young woman was Hester Lowder.

A servant conducted her up stairs to the inn parlor, and the landlord came to her presently. She arose from the hearth, beside which she had seated herself in a crouching attitude, and without removing her vail, inquired if a gentleman named John Harroville was stopping there.

"No such person here, or in Ardleigh, ma'am," was the reply of the worthy landlord.

"Is—is there a gentleman at Tressilian Court named Jasper Lowder?" asked the wronged young wife, in a faltering voice.

"There may be, ma'am. I don't know," returned the innkeeper. "If the gentleman you seek is a friend of Sir Arthur Tressilian or Mr. Guy, you'll find him or hear of him at the Court. Shall I send a messenger for you?"

The childless young wife shook her head, and said simply that she would walk to the Court. Declining all proffers of a vehicle or of a guide, she took her departure from the inn, and set out at once for Tressilian Court on foot and alone.

Moving wearily down the village street, past the closed shops, past groups of carolling children, past the picturesque stone church, through whose open doors glimpses might be had of Christmas decorations in full progress of manufacture at the hands of merry-voiced young girls and lover-like attendants, Hester gained the open country. She glided like a shadow along the gray, wintry road, with its bare, leafless hedges on either side, but for her the morning had no sunshine, no glow, no brightness.

When at last she reached the small gate in the high

wall of Tressilian Park, at which she had seen her husband upon the occasion of her former visit to the Court, she halted, as if expecting to see him awaiting her there. But the gate was locked, and only a blank wall met her gaze.

With a moaning sigh, she hurried swiftly and silently on, not stopping again until she reached the gate lodge of the Court. At the door of the lodge she halted and knocked. The lodge-keeper gave her admittance, looking wonderingly upon the black-robed, shrinking figure, in such strong contrast to the joyous morning.

"Can you tell me," asked Hester, in her soft, fluttering voice, "if there is a gentleman at Tressilian Court named Jasper Lowder?"

"There ain't no such gentleman there, ma'am," replied the lodge-keeper. "There's no guests at the Court this year, more's the pity."

"Not there! not at the Court! Oh, pitying Heaven, what shall I do?"

The wild cry went to the soul of the old woman who tended the lodge gates.

"Is the gentleman your relation, ma'am?" she inquired, in a tone of honest sympathy.

"He is my husband. He was Mr. Tressilian's travelling companion—"

"Sure, then, Mr. Tressilian can tell you where he is. You've come in good time, ma'am. The family haven't started for church yet, nor won't under an hour. Won't you sit down and rest yourself?"

"No, no. I will go on to the Court, as you suggest. Mr. Tressilian will surely know where *he* is. Thank you for your kindness, but I must go."

Full of pity for the singular young visitor, and forbearing to question her, the lodge-keeper conducted her

to the door opening into the home grounds of the Court, and directed Hester how to reach the house.

Obedying these directions, the wronged wife glided along a garden path shaded by thick growing firs and larches, and came out upon the wide grand avenue near the principal porch of the dwelling. She mounted the tall flight of stone steps guarded by stone lions, and sounded the massive knocker.

A tall footman in livery opened the door.

"Is Mr. Guy Tressilian at home?" the young wife faltered, one black-gloved hand clinging to the door-post.

The footman answered in the affirmative, and Hester moved feebly into the grand hall.

"I—I wish to see him," she said.

The footman bowed, and ushered the visitor into the morning room, inquiring :

"What name shall I say, Madam?"

"No name. I—I— Mr. Tressilian does not know me. Say a stranger."

The servant bowed respectfully, and withdrew to seek Jasper Lowder and inform him that a young woman, in deep mourning and great distress, had come to him for assistance.

The morning room was bright and cosy and warm. The sun came in through the lace curtains at the window. The fire burned and glowed with dancing flames. The vases upon the low marble mantel-piece were crowded with fresh flowers from the conservatory, and their fragrance filled the summer-like air. The pictures in the room were framed in laurel wreaths, in honor of the day. But all this warmth and brightness were unappreciated by the bereaved girl mother. She shivered with the inward chill that came from her heart.

Presently a quick, careless tread was heard in the hall, the door opened, and Jasper Lowder entered the room.

He had attired himself for church in one of the handsomest of his Paris suits. A contented smile was on his face, a complacent expression in his eyes. He knew nothing as yet of that fatal discovery of Sir Arthur's—the scar which the Baronet had sought upon his wrist and failed to find—and he believed that all his schemes were working well, and that he had swept the last obstacle from his path of wrong-doing.

He approached the veiled, black-robed visitor with a jaunty debonair expression.

“My servant said you wished to see me, Madam,” he observed, with condescension. “This is Christmas morning, and you will not be sent away empty-handed. What can I do for you?”

Slowly Hester Lowder arose from her chair. She took one step toward him, and threw back her heavy black veil, disclosing a face from which all girlish brightness had fled—a face so wan, so woeful, so piteous, that Jasper Lowder started back, scarcely recognizing it.

The next moment, a wild cry springing from her lips, a light breaking through the gloom on her face, the young wife bounded forward, and flung herself, half fainting, upon his breast.

A look of terror convulsed Lowder's features, and a frightful oath escaped his lips. He would have flung her from him, but that she clung to him so desperately, with such despairing, anguished hold.

“What is the meaning of this wild freak?” he ejaculated harshly. “Did I not tell you not to come here again?”

Hester lifted her head as if a serpent had stung her

but the next moment, drooping her head again to the breast that should have been her shield and bulwark, she began to sob wildly between her sudden joy at seeing him, and her awful grief at the loss of her child.

"Oh, Jasper!" she sobbed. "They said you were not here. I asked for Mr. Tressilian, and you have come to me. Tell me, has he forgiven you?"

"Yes, yes. Don't speak so loud. Some one may hear you."

"He has forgiven you and taken you back! God has heard my prayers. Oh, Jasper! I have prayed night and morning that Mr. Tressilian would pardon and love you again. I have been so anxious, Jasper, about you!"

"Well, what if you have? It seems to me, if you think so much of me, you could do as I tell you. I ordered you to stay at Gloam Fell, and here you are again spying after me—"

"Oh, Jasper!" moaned the unhappy young wife, shuddering as with an ague, and uplifting her pallid, tear-drenched, woeful face in piteous pleading. "I shall die if you speak so harshly to me. I have only come to you because my heart is breaking, and I have no one in all the wide earth to go to but you. I am in sore trouble. I have brought you bad news."

"Bad news!" cried Lowder, his thoughts reverting to the letter he had received from Palestro, announcing Guy Tressilian's return to England, and a gray pallor settling down upon his visage. "Speak. What is it?"

"Prepare yourself for the saddest news you can hear, Jasper!" said the unconscious young wife, feeling his heart rise and fall in quick, convulsive bounds. "Oh, my poor husband! Our boy—"

"Our boy!" ejaculated Lowder, in sudden relief. "The bad news concerns him then? I thought—"

He checked himself abruptly.

"Does not my mourning dress tell you the story?" asked the young wife, in her sorrowing voice. "Our baby, Jasper—our bright, blue-eyed boy, with his sweet ways, his lovely face, his loving baby soul is—*dead*!"

"Dead?"

"It seems impossible to you as to me, dearest, but he is dead. He died the night before last. He is lying now in his little crib at Gloam Fell, in his white night-gown, his tiny hands crossed, a smile on his tiny face. Oh, my husband," and the piteous voice broke into a low, mournful wail, "I have only you now! I wanted you to see him before they bury him out of our sight forever. I knew you would not forgive me if they put our baby under those terrible snows without giving you the chance to look on his baby face once more. You did not answer the letters I sent you, and I had no way of getting you there in time, without coming for you myself."

"The child is dead!" said Lowder, thinking more of himself than of the sorrowing young mother. "Well, perhaps it is just as well—"

"Jasper!"

"I mean it, Hester. There's no use in being foolish and sentimental. Children are incumbrances anyway. Of course it's hard on you, but death is the inevitable lot, and it is better for the child to die when he's little than to grow up to be a disappointment to you."

"He never would have been that," breathed the young wife, with all a mother's tender and steadfast faith. "My boy! my beautiful boy! So tender, so pure, so lovely! My whole soul mourns for him! You are all I have in the whole wide world now, Jasper!" she said again, clinging to him yet more closely, as if confident that, despite all his harshness, his love and tenderness would not fail her in her hour of trouble.

In spite of himself, Lowder's hard heart was touched by her unswerving faith in him. His better nature asserted itself. It is true that his heart had turned from Hester, that he loved golden-haired Blanche with passionate fervor, and that he contemplated an act of terrible treachery to both these women—that of making Blanche his wife while Hester yet lived—yet now he felt something of his old affection for Hester thrill his heart. She was his wife. Her head had lain in his bosom. She had been the mother of his child. She had been the only one in all the world, except his own dead mother, who had ever really loved him. And now she mourned in desolation and anguish for his dead son. All these thoughts crowded into Lowder's soul, evoking a feeling of tenderness and pity for her.

He drew her to a silken couch in a corner near the hearth, and gently gathered her to his bosom.

"My poor Hester!" he said, caressing softly her hair from which her hat had fallen back. "My poor wife! Forgive my harshness. I have many things to trouble me. I grieve with you. I had formed many plans for our boy. I am sorry I cannot go back with you to Gloam Fell—"

"What! Are you not going?"

"I cannot. You must trust me, Hester, trust my love and faith. Mr. Tressilian needs me, and I dare not ask leave of absence, even to bury our boy. You must go back alone, and at once."

The poor young wife sighed.

"Alone! Alone! Oh, my husband!"

"If you love me, you must do as I say. I am not yet upon an assured footing here. I cannot introduce you to my patron or his family. I want you to go quietly, without speaking a word of me even in the village. Where is your cab?"

"At the inn at Ardleigh."

"You must hasten to the village immediately. Do you need money?"

Hester shook her head.

"You will need some for burial expenses. Here—take my purse," and he thrust it in her pocket. "You must not be seen here. Go back to Gloam Fell, and remain there till I come for you. And now you must go."

"But, Jasper, I do not understand—"

"I will explain everything some time. I will come to see you soon. Now you must go."

The young wife arose wearily, her wan, white face wearing a pitiful look of anguish. She moved two or three steps across the floor, and then tottered back, with a great cry, and flung herself in Lowder's arms.

"My heart is breaking!" she moaned piteously.

"Bear up, Hester. Be brave. In Heaven's name, would you ruin me? I tell you your longer presence here will be my ruin!"

"I will go, Jasper. Heaven knows I would die rather than bring harm to you. One last kiss, Jasper. I am going."

Their lips met in the final caress. Hester clung to him as to her last tangible hope, sobbing and weeping in an utter desolation and despair.

They were standing thus, when the catastrophe Jasper Lowder had feared came upon the usurper.

The door opened, and Blanche and Sir Arthur, attired for church, and quite unconscious that the room was occupied, came into the room.

At sight of Lowder and his wife in the midst of that final embrace, both Sir Arthur and Blanche started back in horror and amazement.

At the same moment Lowder became conscious of the presence of the intruders, and recoiled several

paces, nearly flinging his wife to the floor. His eyes seemed starting from their sockets, and all things reeled around him.

And thus the four, every one nearly paralyzed, stood staring at each other.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A "MERRY CHRISTMAS."

For a few moments each member of the little group remained as if transfixed where they stood. Sir Arthur looked from Lowder to Hester and back again. At last he turned and offered Blanche his arm, saying, in a tone indicative of a chill displeasure :

"I think we had better withdraw, my dear. This is no place for you."

Poor Hester looked into the grave, stern face of the Baronet, and then toward her husband. Lowder was completely overwhelmed by the disaster that had overtaken him. His face, overspread with an ashen pallor, his gasping breath, his convulsed features, all declared that he had not yet attained his self-command. His terror and agitation brought to Hester's mind his declaration that her presence at Tressilian Court, if known, would ruin him.

Forgetful of herself in her anxiety for her husband, the timid young wife sprang toward the door, intercepting the retreat of Sir Arthur and Blanche, and standing before them with clasped hands and pleading, upraised face.

"Don't be angry with him !" she cried piteously. "It

is all my fault. I ought not to have come to Tressilian Court—he told me not to—but my baby, my poor baby is dead !”

Blanche dropped her hand from her guardian's arm. Her soul thrilled with pity for this slender, mourning, young creature.

“It is Mrs. Lowder !” exclaimed Sir Arthur, recognizing the pleading stranger.

“Yes, it is I, Hester Lowder—”

“Not another word !” interposed her husband, in a quick, harsh voice. “I will make the necessary explanations. You must go.”

“And leave you to Sir Arthur's displeasure ?” cried the generous wife. “Never, never, Jasper ! It is all my fault. You will not be angry with him, Sir Arthur, because I ventured here !”

The Baronet took a step nearer Hester.

“What did you call him ?” he demanded.

Lowder repeated his command to his wife to depart. But Hester, believing that her pleadings would remove the Baronet's unaccountable displeasure at her presence, would not go.

“I called him Jasper,” she said. “He—”

Lowder drowned her voice by a loud cry, and bounded toward her, grasping her arm with a violence that made her wince with pain.

“Not another word,” he hissed, “if you would not have me hate you.”

“Oh, Jasper ?” the wronged young wife cried involuntarily. “Oh, my husband ?”

“Your husband ?” ejaculated Sir Arthur.

“Your husband !” exclaimed Blanche.

“I thought,” said the Baronet sternly, “that your name was Lowder, and that you were the wife of my son's travelling companion ?”

"I am—I am! Jasper, don't hurt me so! I am Hester Lowder, Sir Arthur, the wife of Jasper Lowder. If you would call your son, sir, Mr. Guy Tressilian, he would befriend us."

"Ah! And who is the man who is grasping your arm so tightly, Mrs. Lowder?" exclaimed Sir Arthur, in a sudden and terrible agitation.

"He—don't Jasper!—he is my husband, of course. He is Jasper Lowder!"

A strange cry came from the Baronet's lips. It sounded like a prayer of thanksgiving.

It was echoed by Blanche, who sank down upon the nearest chair suddenly strengthless.

Jasper Lowder flung his wife violently from him.

"The woman is mad!" he cried. "Her troubles have upset her mind. You do not credit her wretched vagary, father—"

At this juncture a fierce tattoo sounded upon the front door. An impatient hand was evidently plying the knocker. Had any of the group in the bright morning room looked from the window, they would have seen a carriage standing before the door, having come quietly up the drive, and would have beheld three persons standing upon the house steps.

But not one member of the group stirred. They were too absorbed in the scene in which they were actors to heed any sound without.

"Father!" repeated Hester Lowder, in a bewildered voice, looking from the usurper to the Baronet. "Jasper, have you found your father? Is Sir Arthur Tressilian your father?"

"No—a thousand times no!" thundered the Baronet. "This man is no son of mine. My instinct has always revolted from him. I had proved him an impostor and usurper before your arrival—"

At this juncture the room door was opened, and two persons quietly entered—Guy Tressilian and his bride !

Behind them, in the door-way and unobserved, stood Devereux Gower, a mocking smile on his face, a restless glitter in his eyes.

Just within the room, Guy and Olla paused. The former had removed his hat, and stood before them tall, straight and handsome, the light of intellect in his glorious blue eyes, and a joyous glow on his face.

He spoke no word, but bestowed a scathing look upon the man who had stolen his birthright. Then he turned his gaze upon Sir Arthur.

As he encountered the glance from those sunny eyes, as his eager eyes almost devoured that noble face, the father's heart, that had seemed frozen within him, broke its icy fetters and bounded with strange new warmth and life. It was not needful that Guy should speak. It was not needful that he should declare his identity. Sir Arthur knew him, and with a great cry bounded forward and clasped him to his breast.

"Guy !" he cried. "My son ! my son !"

We will not dwell upon the joy of that glad reunion. The son had come back to his own, noble, brave and high-souled, and his father welcomed him as one from the dead.

Blanche and Olla wept in sympathy.

Jasper Lowder looked at windows and doors, and saw no way of escape. He sat down, pallid and trembling, a guilty flush on his cheek, and an apprehensive glare in his eyes. His sin had found him out, and it only remained to meet his punishment.

It was long before the reunited father and son had thought of others than themselves. But at length Guy gently disengaged himself from his father's clasp, and taking Olla's hand, drew her near to Sir Arthur.

"Father," he said, in his rich, winning voice. "I have an explanation to make to you. I was wounded in the head in my shipwreck on the Sicilian shore; I awaked to life an idiot—a helpless, downright idiot. I have been friendless, forlorn, and near to death. That I have my mind again—that I am living to-day—is due to this noble girl at my side. She is my preserver, my guardian, my benefactress. In her own dark hours of peril, she would not forsake the helpless imbecile whose only claim upon her was that of a common humanity. It is she you have to thank for seeing me again in this life."

Sir Arthur stretched out his hand in warm impulsiveness to Olla. The small, dark, beautiful face glowed under his glances; the dusky velvety eyes regarded him pleadingly, but Olla's hand did not move forward to meet his.

"Father," continued Guy, his voice tremulous with a great emotion, "Olla is more to me than guardian or benefactress. She is my wife!"

Sir Arthur started with astonishment, but the tender smile on his face grew tenderer, and the light in his eyes grew kindlier, as he drew the young girl to his breast and kissed the shy, sweet little face.

"My daughter!" he said, with fatherly kindness, his voice as tremulous as Guy's had been, "you are welcome to our home and to our hearts. This is a happy surprise to me. This is the happiest Christmas I ever knew!"

He kissed her again, and released her. Olla felt that he had taken her to his heart, and installed her in his affections, all unknown to him as she was, and that she had gained a father as well as a husband.

Guy drew his wife's arm in his, and led her toward Blanche, who received them with smiles and tears.

"Blanche," he said simply, "I bring you a sister. Olla, this is Blanche, of whom I have told you."

The two girls embraced each other tenderly.

Leaving them together, Guy Tressilian regarded his false friend and former companion with a stern, sad gaze.

Lowder trembled like a leaf in the breeze, and arose, approaching Tressilian, his eyes downcast before that stern accusing look.

"Jasper Lowder !" uttered Tressilian, in a sorrowful voice. "Is it thus we meet again ?"

A great sob burst from Lowder's heaving breast. He put up his hands blindly.

"Oh, Guy, Guy !" he cried, his features working, "I thank Heaven you are saved and brought back to your own ! As God is my judge, I have always mourned for you. I thought you the same as dead. I was poor, and thrown by your affliction again upon the world ; the temptation was greater than I could resist. I am guilty—guilty a thousandfold. Retribution has overtaken me at last, as I have always secretly feared it would. Again I say I am glad that your mind has been restored, and that you have come back. I deserve any punishment the law will inflict. I have cheated, wronged and robbed Sir Arthur. I have imposed upon innocent Blanche, and would have married her, when I have a wife already. I suppose," he added despairingly, "that you have an officer without. I see some one at the door. Let him come in and take me !"

Hester Lowder uttered a wild shriek, and rushing forward, cast herself at the feet of Sir Arthur Tressilian. She had comprehended the whole scene.

"Oh, spare him !" she pleaded, her voice breaking with a desperate anguish. "Spare him, Sir Arthur. Spare him, Mr. Tressilian. He did not know what he

did. Spare him for my sake. He is all I have in the world. And I love him ! In spite of all, I love him !"

Sir Arthur did not answer.

"Father," said Guy gently, a sudden moisture in his blue eyes, "if this poor, wronged young wife can forgive the husband who deserted her, and who would have married another, can we not forgive him?"

Sir Arthur bowed his head.

"He can go !" he said. "The only punishment he will receive for his wrong-doing will come from his own remorse. Mrs. Lowder, your love for him has won his immunity from justice !"

Hester Lowder arose and kissed the Baronet's hand and breathed her thanks. Jasper Lowder looked like one who has received a pardon when upon the scaffold. He muttered his gratitude, and taking Hester's hand moved toward the door.

He had advanced but two or three paces, when he halted, breathing hard. The door had been flung wide open, and upon the threshold still stood Mr. Devereux Gower, a sneering smile upon his full, sensual lips.

A glow of recognition, full of bitter hatred, overspread Jasper Lowder's face.

"My father !" he gasped, with a menacing stare.

Mr. Gower advanced a few paces, still smiling.

"Yes, I am your father, Jasper Lowder !" he exclaimed.

"The father who deserted me in my boyhood—the father who left me to struggle with the world—who exposed me to this terrible temptation which has wrecked me ! Accursed—"

Mr. Gower waved one hand with a graceful flourish.

"Hold !" he said. "Spare your curses, young man. I am your father, Devereux Gower. I know your history and your—your errors. I am wifeless and childless,

except for you. As Sir Arthur Tressilian has kindly forgiven you, and as you seem to be a young man of some ability, I am willing to acknowledge you as Jasper Lowder Gower, my son and heir. What do you say? Shall it be peace between us?"

"Peace!" breathed Hester.

"Yes," assented Lowder, after a hard struggle with himself. "It shall be peace."

He held out his hand, and Mr. Gower shook it warmly. Their reconciliation was complete.

"You will not leave me, Hester, now you know all?" said Jasper humbly. "I deserve that you should abandon me—"

"But I will not!" said Hester tenderly. You have done wrong, Jasper, but you can repent. We will begin life over again. Come!"

They went out together, Mr. Gower following them. The three entered a waiting cab and drove down the avenue, passing a fly in which sat the Popleys, mother and son.

Proceeding directly to Gloucester, the little party of Gowers took the first train for Northumberland, hastening to Gloam Fell.

And there, by the inanimate form of his dead child, with his wife kneeling beside him and urging upon him in tender, wifely words, the beauty of a nobler, better life, Jasper Lowder found a new manhood. Over the tiny, wax-like face of his first-born, he vowed to become an honorable, honest man; and he kept his word. In the grave of his little child were buried all unhappy remembrances, and with his wife and his father, who soon grew to be proud of him, he lived a life that was not all harshness and selfishness, but had in it the elements of beauty and goodness.

And to-day, looking at his meek, true-hearted young wife, he says that he was "redeemed by love."

But to return to Tressilian Court and its inmates.

When the Gowers had departed, Sir Arthur suddenly missed Blanche, who had stolen from the room.

He went in search of her, finding her in the library, standing by the window, and looking out upon the wintry lawn.

He went up to her and took her hand in his.

"Are you grieving over your disappointment in Jasper Lowder?" he asked gently.

Blanche shuddered.

"No, indeed, Sir Arthur," she exclaimed. "I should never have married him, in any case. I made up my mind last night that I had rather die than marry him. My respect for him died the night I saw him commit the robbery, and as to love—I never loved him."

"Guy is married—"

"And I rejoice in his marriage!" cried Blanche, with animation. "His Olla is the sweetest, noblest, bravest girl in all England. Only think! He owes his life and reason to her!"

"And you are sure, Blanche, that all these changes and occurrences have given you no pang?"

"Quite sure."

"Pardon me, Blanche," urged her guardian gently, "but it is my greatest fear lest you should have received some wound. You are sure you never loved?"

Blanche's face flushed, then paled.

"I—I didn't say that," she whispered.

"You have loved, then? And I would have died to save you a sorrow. Oh, Blanche! Blanche!"

Blanche raised her grave gray eyes, now dark and luminous with feeling. Sir Arthur started back, read-

ing in their lucid depths the young girl's secret. She loved him even as he loved her.

"My darling!" he whispered. "Is it I whom you love?"

Blanche whispered a soft assent.

Not one of the family of Tressilian Court attended church that day, but their joy and gratitude were none the less to the kind Providence that had overruled all things for their good.

A month later Sir Arthur Tressilian purchased a handsome estate in the neighborhood of Tressilian Court for his son, and Guy and Olla, with their household, which included the Popleys, entered upon its possession, with a handsome income to support it. Early in February Sir Arthur and Blanche were married, and it would be hard to tell which is the happier of the two young brides, or which the prouder and more tender, the Baronet or his son.

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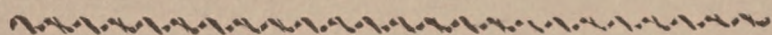
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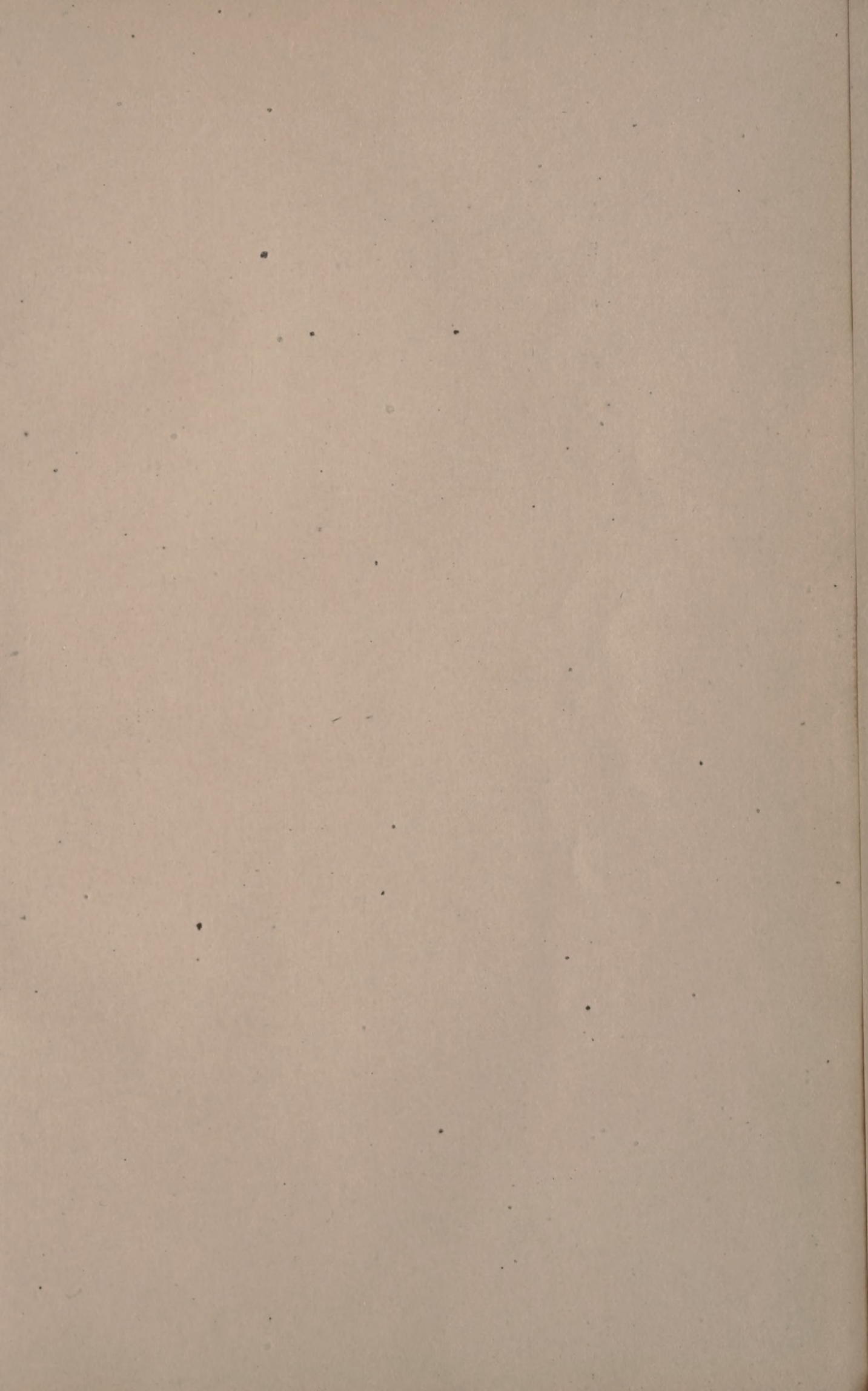
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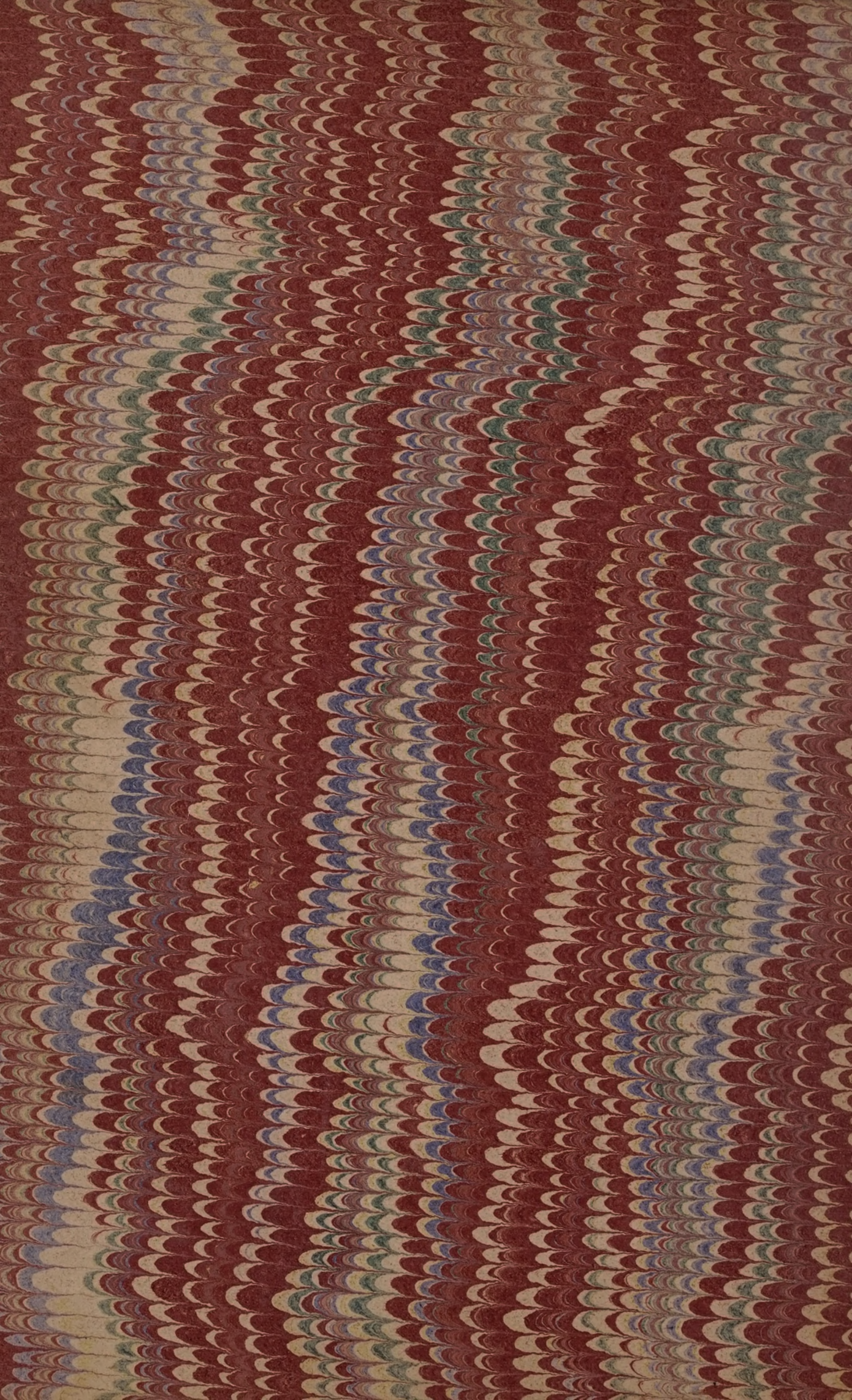
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